THREE AGAINST FATE

There had been two men in Jean's life: Harold, her soldier husband whom she loved, and Stephen, the pacifist politician who loved her. The scene of this tense and powerful study of her mind is London during the tragic days of the War.

Mary Agnes Hamilton

$2.50

THREE AGAINST FATE

By Mary Agnes Hamilton

JEAN CLAVIGER, happily married to Harold, finds her security suddenly swept away when her husband returns from the Front on leave. He is a stranger to her, silent, aloof. After he has gone she tries to forget her fears. Stephen, a pacifist friend, helps her to find interests outside of her own problems. He falls in love with her, and Harold, finding them together, shoots him in a sudden fury. Then comes the trial. As the lawyers weave their case of twisted facts and motives, Jean broods at home, searching through her past life for the real cause of the tragedy, and planning for its atonement.

'Three Against Fate' is no ordinary story of physical action, but a drama of the mind — of an inner struggle so intense, so vital, that one is held spellbound until the end. Jean and Harold, each in the dark as to the other's thoughts, groping blindly, struggling against forces neither of them fully understands — these Miss Hamilton draws with remarkable clearness and tremendous power.

THREE AGAINST FATE

Hamilton

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Three Against Fate

A TALE OF 1917

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MARY AGNES HAMILTON

Three Against Fate

A TALE OF 1917

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To
R. L.

There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow.

HAMLET, V. II

Three Against Fate

CHAPTER I

WITH a shock as sharp as though her alarum clock had sounded, Roberta Darsy sat up in bed. The room was black; when she extracted her watch from under her pillow, the luminous face registered between twenty and fifteen minutes to one. That meant she had not been asleep for more than an hour, and as a rule she slept right through to seven or, at times, eight o'clock. What had waked her?

A rattle of thunder shook the house: through the close-drawn curtains a flash of brilliant light tore; instantly, another, louder peal of noise followed the first — a noise that, beginning on a deep roaring note, ended in a long whining shriek and was instantly repeated again, and yet again, louder and more terrifying at each repetition. Frightfully near, too: indeed, to her it sounded immediately overhead. Of course it was not thunder: those were guns shattering the quiet of the night. Yet she tried to pretend it was thunder, for thunder, although she disliked it, did not dissolve her mind in the annihilating sensations that now invaded and possessed her body. A clammy perspiration was rising on her brow; there was a sick sinking in her stomach; as the fierce sound shook her again, panic took possession, became unbearable. She could not endure by herself another minute longer. Jean, after all, was not likely to be asleep.

With a bound she was out of bed, into her slippers, out of

her own room, across the narrow passage, and knocking at the door opposite. A blast of angry noise seemed to take and shake her, as she stood there, trembling and shivering: a crash and rattle as of huge stones falling on top of one another and on her. It unnerved her so completely that, instead of knocking, she fell against the door and was inside the room without being aware that she had opened it. It was as dark as her own had been, but the voice in which Jean cried out 'Hallo!' was comfortingly normal and steady.

'Poor old thing,' it went on, 'I know you hate this.' She had sat up as she spoke, and now snapped on the light of the reading-lamp on the small table at the head of her bed. 'It's a big one, too. . .'

'I should think I did hate it,' replied Roberta. 'I'm simply gibbering with fright. Has it been going on long?'

'At least ten minutes, so you must actually have slept through part of it — which is a pretty good effort at heroism. But there's evidently lots more to come. Listen! Quite near, to-night. That's the worst of these fine moons you admire so.'

Roberta sat down on the side of her bed.

'I don't seem to mind it quite so much when I'm not by myself.'

Jean gave a grin.

> '"Two are better far than one,
> For comfort or for strife,
> For two can keep each other warm,
> And serve the Lord aright."

You don't know that? It's a pity you weren't brought up properly. Look here — wrap yourself up in my eiderdown; no, I'm perfectly warm; too hot if anything. Go on.'

'You've not been asleep at all?' Roberta asked, as she obeyed, looking at her bright eyes and marvelling at her

apparent calm. Jean looked small, somehow, in bed, and young, with her dark short hair, usually so neat, all tousled, and her wide-open hazel eyes large and dark from the extreme distension of their pupils: when she smiled, very young. But the smile died away, and the Jean of the last four weeks looked at her, white-faced, shadowed, drawn, unnaturally sombre. No face that Roberta knew changed as completely as did this under the impress of the thoughts behind; that was why her repeated efforts to draw it had ended in a series of failures. Even the features seemed to vary. When Jean smiled, her nose was impertinent and the curve of her mouth irresistibly gay: her face then had the irrelevant charm that belongs to a delightful kitten. Nothing kittenish in it now — now she looked suddenly like the woman in Millais's 'Order of Release': all the Scotch in her came out and, above her high cheek-bones, her eyes were pools of sadness. Was it to be expected that she could sleep — with her husband in prison, week after week (astonishing to recall that it was only four weeks since that fatal second of September), and his trial, for murder, coming on tomorrow in the High Court? Put like that, it sounded incredible, ridiculous: the sort of thing that happened to other people, people far away, people you could not even imagine; not, possibly, to anyone you knew.

Another furious detonation tore the sky without: it was so near that the very curtains seemed to be agitated by its awful passage. Jean lay flat on her back, staring up at the pool of light made on the ceiling by her electric lamp — she did not move as the sound shook the room. Roberta shuddered and drew the eiderdown close round her. The incredible thing was a fact, and to any fact whatsoever one got accustomed . . . She did not mind the noise as much as she had done, a few minutes ago . . . And facts that were

someone else's, not one's own, were — shocking as the admission might be — easier to accept. Having Jean with her in the studio made it easier for her to forget what the papers called 'The Claviger Case' than it would have been if she had only read about it. In Jean herself there was so much of the old familiar friend that it obliterated the new, un-understandable Mrs. Claviger. She loved her, dearly; yet to her, even now, the Jean who lived in her thoughts and whom she knew best and loved most was the old, gay companion of student days, not the tragic wife of Harold Claviger who had shot his friend, Stephen Henshaw, for her sake — or so it appeared, and so his counsel believed. That was a Jean she did not either know or understand. And yet, somehow, the two were one and the same. Absurd for her to feel that when Jean Farquhar flashed out for a moment from behind the silent mask of Jean Claviger, she was seeing the real person. Jean Claviger was as real as the hideous racket shrieking over their heads now, again, after a momentary lull that made its renewal the more atrocious.

Jean had sat up and now had her head cocked, listening to it, a cigarette between her lips, in her fingers a match ready to light it. Her fingers did not tremble; the cigarette was held out quite straight between her lips; but in her eyes there was an expression that made Roberta shiver inside with a fear more painful than the fear bred in her by the guns. Her fear of the guns was automatic: it was a reflex physical sensation she could not control: the other fear was different, and far worse. To a person like Jean things did not just happen. There was something inside her, unfathomable to Roberta, which was akin to those guns. The thought rose unbidden, but as she looked at it, she was shocked at herself for thinking it.

'Ow!' Another tremendous burst of noise and light to-

gether — a light that seemed to dart through the room, so that she would not have been surprised if she had seen flame following after it: indeed, was surprised rather that everything remained in its old position — made her bury her head in the coverlet.

'Funny thing, fear,' Jean remarked, when she reëmerged. 'Interesting, too, isn't it?'

Roberta glanced at her; she knew there was no criticism of her in the remark: Jean meant just what she said.

'You don't seem to feel it. How is that?' she asked.

'I don't know. Partly, I suppose, that there's a noise inside my head, far worse than this, that never stops. It's gone on ever since . . .' She did not complete her clause: Roberta knew well enough what was left out.

'So you see,' Jean continued, 'the real noise is almost a relief. I don't think I'm going mad, you see, when it's actually there.'

Roberta looked away, about the room. Of course, she had been there when Harold shot Stephen; that must be the noise she meant. It was the first time she had got near to that day in talk, and Roberta waited now, in the hope that she might go on. She did not dare — yes, literally, that was how it was — to put her any question, on that. Intimate friends as they were, she had, throughout the weeks of their being together in her flat, been unable to put to her a single one of the questions that haunted her mind and hovered perpetually on her lips. She did not know now, any better than she had done when she read the story in the evening papers, what it meant to Jean: whether her despair — there was no other word to describe the strange and awful numbness that seemed to hold her prisoner in a silence in her most unnatural — arose from Stephen's having been killed or Harold's having killed him, and sitting now in

prison as his murderer. Jean either could not or would not speak. Surely, however, there was only one conclusion to be drawn from the fact that she had seen Harold only once since it happened: that that first visit to him in prison had also been the last; the same conclusion forced home by the fact that here, in her bedroom, there was no photograph of him; that on the little table by her bed the image in the frame was of her father, not of Harold. Yes: but if there was no photograph of Harold, there was none of Stephen either. She might shudder away from Harold without being in love with Stephen. She might — but, remembering what Jean had once felt about her husband, Roberta doubted this. From a thing so strong, one could hardly escape into vacancy. She did not know much about love herself, but she had read a great many novels. And in novels it was always love, admitted or unadmitted, for someone else, that broke up happy marriages. Perhaps at the Old Bailey that would be cleared up.

The noise roared round them again. In France, this went on the whole time, she supposed; all the time, anyhow, you expected it, and sat under some rotten parapet of squiggly mud, with nothing to do but wait for a bit to make a bloody mess of you.

'What a curse an imagination is!' she muttered, out of these thoughts.

'Oh, I don't know,' Jean replied. 'In a way, it makes things easier . . . You don't get such awful shocks if you have thought of everything beforehand. And you can play games with your thoughts then; make jig-saw puzzles of them . . . It must be worse, really, if you can't.'

Where was she now? Harold had little imagination: Stephen a great deal. And Stephen had played with thoughts, with incomparable brilliancy; remarks of his came

back, often, to her now; she had felt while she was drawing him that she could forgive much to anyone who could amuse her as he did by his talk. Of Harold's talk she could remember nothing. She had, as Jean of course knew, never seen the point of Harold, whereas Stephen had alternately fascinated and repelled, and always interested her. He, anyhow, was much more Jean's sort . . . Surely, the racket outside was nearer, appallingly near, now.

'Oh, my goodness! Can't it stop? I'd hate you to see me getting under the bed . . . And a lot of good that'd be, anyhow!'

'Does it make you want to kill Germans?' asked Jean, over an interval, in which the entire building seemed to rock and reverberate.

'I don't think so,' she replied. 'What's the good of that? One can't kill the right ones — killing the servants is no good, and the masters are safe in bed — like ours. They anyhow seem to me much of a muchness.'

'Yes. But once — it seems incredible now — I thought it was all their fault . . . How I could! But I did. There was no excuse for me, really. Father always used to say, "It's always your own fault."'

'Of course it isn't.'

'Yes, yes, of course it is. I suppose that's why Hughes and Eden won't have me in Court. They think so — and they think I should give it away . . .'

Both Hughes the solicitor and, she understood, J. F. Eden, K.C., too, did think so, although how Jean had gathered that she could not imagine.

'I handled Hughes very badly,' Jean went on meditatively. 'I ought to have been in black and tears; instead, I made it hopelessly difficult for him. My mind was blocked by that wart on his cheek. If I were Mrs. Hughes — I suppose

there is a Mrs. Hughes: that sort of man is always married — I should make him have it operated on . . . I couldn't look at anything else, and I'm sure he knew it. It grew larger and larger as I listened to him until it swelled into a great red bomb, and I thought: What if it were to go off — it would fill the entire room . . . I do dislike that man.'

'Eden, anyhow, is supposed to be tremendously able: he charges enormous fees.'

'Well, Mr. Claviger can afford them — the mills are on full time now...'

'It's stopping,' announced Roberta.

It was. In a few seconds more she could get up, unwrap herself from her casings, push back her disordered hair out of her eyes, and straighten her spectacles. She even accepted a cigarette, and suggested making a cup of tea: a suggestion well received by Jean.

As she stood in the little kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil, she shivered as she recollected that to-morrow — no, to-day — she was to go to the Old Bailey. A paper had commissioned her to do some drawings — one had to do these ghoulish things, if one lived on one's drawings; but her real purpose in going there was to come back and tell Jean everything about it. Jean herself was not to be there: Eden, without waiting to find out whether or no she had thought of going, had insisted that on no account must she do so; so Roberta would have to tell her everything. Jean would see to that: no use ever to try to spare her by intelligent skipping; she had discovered that, in relation to the newspapers. She would have to do it in the dark, too, never knowing when or whether she were plunging a deadly barb in the most sensitive part of her sensitive friend's anatomy. There could, in the nature of the case, be nothing but horrors to report. Harold, it seemed to her, was bound to be con-

demned, and if condemned, to be hanged. How there came to be a case at all: how his father had persuaded any solicitor or barrister to undertake a defence that must be a lie from start to finish, she was too ignorant of the law to comprehend. But the result must be his condemnation. Then, for the rest of her life, Jean would be the widow of a murderer. Would she rather be his widow than his wife? That was the atrocious alternative. If, incredibly, Harold got off, she would still be tied to him.

The kettle seemed very slow; of course, the gas was miserable, nowadays. If only she knew more about Harold. But she had not seen him since 1916, and not very often or at all intimately before that. There had certainly been a time when he had made Jean happy. The letter in which she had first told Roberta about him and the radiant glow of her when she first saw her again after her marriage were things she could hardly bear to think of now. When she herself first met him, she had not seen, at all, what Jean saw in him — but did one ever *see* the husbands of one's friends? He was nice, and he was nice-looking; that was as far as she got. Even drawing him had revealed little more to her. Jean had told her he was startlingly like the Barberini Faun; she had perceived the resemblance, dimly, but Jean said it was strongest when he was asleep, and Harold asleep she had not seen. For her, he was, even in 1916, little more than the typical decent, clean, well-set-up, youngish Englishman, who became the typical lieutenant of what were still called 'the New Armies': the sort of man to whose thoughts she had no key; who went through unspeakable things (or so, from home, one supposed), and yet, miraculously, remained unchanged, remained decent, clean, and nice, in spite of them. To that there had to be added, even, surely in 1916, the fact that Jean loved him. She had, anyhow,

loved him enough, once, to live in Bluehills with him. Roberta had never seen Bluehills; but to live in any provincial town and be happy said something both about husband and wife. It said a great deal in Jean's case. Roberta felt she knew what Bluehills was like, yet she wished now she had gone to see. It was not the sort of place in which one ever found one's self by accident, but Jean had asked her often and often — and really she ought to have gone. Jean and Bluehills were certainly a ridiculous combination. That Harold had made it possible for her said a great deal about him. Add that fact to the one great outstanding other fact — that he had shot Stephen — and a person was there who was anyhow not negligible. It was not surprising that she did not understand the Claviger Case, with that factor an x to her imagination. How stupid it was of her not to have made Jean go on talking about Hughes or Eden. That must have produced something. But the wretched guns had started again, just at that point, and driven everything else out of her mind. About personal things Jean had never been anything but reticent. She might have talked about lawyers: about Harold or her married life she had never talked. That reticence in her was not new, and was not to be translated into terms of anything but her sense that some relations were private. She did not gossip intimately even about her friends — how different she was in this respect from other young wives, or wives not so young, with whom Roberta was on terms far less intimate. Thanks to Muriel Payne and Agnes Lorbeer, there was little about marriage she did not know: it had at one time embarrassed her to meet Reggie Payne or Arthur Lorbeer, ignorant as they were of her detailed acquaintance with their psychology and physiology.

At last the kettle boiled. She made the tea and carried it

in. Jean was lying flat on her pillows now, looking pale and exhausted. But she smiled as Roberta came in, and sat up at once. Always she was a person for whom it was worth while to do things: who took nothing — perhaps too little — for granted.

'Do you know, I feel as though I were a patient in hospital, and you my nice kind nurse. The funny thing is that, at the back of my mind, there's an illusion that I am going to die, and everyone is nice to me because they know it. Oh, not to-day: to-morrow, or the day after. I've felt that the whole time. That's why, I suppose, I've let everybody else act, and done nothing. The worst is, though, that I am not going to die — that there's no excuse there; none for just letting go. I haven't, you know, thought — not really thought — about anything, since I came here.'

'Well, at the beginning, you were certainly ill.'

Jean grinned. 'Oh, that was Esther. Twenty-four hours of sustained Liebestod from her. I never saw anything like it. It's no wonder I'm so bad at the grand manner, after that. Hughes would have adored her.'

'I loathe that woman.'

'Oh, yes. Anyhow, coming here from her was like drifting into a sunny bay after nights of howling gale on the open sea. But that's no excuse for me, that's weeks ago. Even then I wasn't ill, and I'm not ill now, only silly. Can't you say something to rouse me, Berta? Mean of me, that, isn't it, when the whole time you've been too wonderful in leaving me alone? I know you're bursting with questions and you haven't put any of them.'

'That's really my cowardice.'

'Oh, no, it isn't. It's your decency. But if you'd put them all, it would have made no difference: I couldn't have answered. I put millions to myself, and get no answers — none that make sense...'

Listening, Roberta wondered if she dared put the one question on which, for her, everything seemed to hinge: could ask her blankly: Did you love Stephen? To that there must be an answer, and it seemed to her that, if she knew it, she would know the whole story. But Jean had stopped her mouth: she could not ask that. Whether Stephen had loved her, she need not ask: she knew he had. Stephen's face was not like Harold's; when she drew him, she could read his secrets. Vivid to her mind, now, those long afternoons in May came back, when Jean had brought him to her studio. Whether it had, in truth, always been sunny when they came, she did not know: it always seemed so, in recollection. Everything had been keyed up and coloured bright. Jean, in her pretty clothes, appeared to have sloughed off the dreariness of mood that had weighted her as a V.A.D. throughout the two previous years, and recovered the careless, ironic gaiety of her younger self. She and Stephen showed each other off, in every sense. They talked; Roberta, busy with her pencils, mostly listened, only throwing in a word now and then, feeling acutely that Jean, at last, was in the right company. Stephen's talk played like summer lightning over the whole immense stage of the war. For the first time she at any rate listened to someone who put into words what she felt about it; who had neither use nor respect for solemn catchwords or sentimental phrases; who, underneath his flippancy, burned with the same savage rage she felt, and yet on the surface could be cynically amusing; could laugh without being heartless. And his wit, his ruthless analysis, even his cruel logic, stimulated qualities in Jean which had been muffled and overlaid while she lived in Bluehills: she caught the balls he threw and cast them back at him, skilfully. Intellectually she was under his influence — she was indeed acting as secretary to his

Stop the War Committee — but her mind and his moved, really, on cognate lines. Or so it had seemed to Roberta. She found herself much nearer to understanding Jean in her verbally cynical moods than she had ever been able to do when she appeared as crusader or crusader's wife. In her casting of herself for that part, indeed, there had been something radically wrong; that she had kept it up for two years proved nothing but her obstinacy. And yet, although in Stephen's company Roberta had gleefully recognized the old Jean, there came back to her now the doubt that had, at times, visited her then, as to whether, on that, she was really a good judge. Again she asked herself: Was the old Jean now truly the real Jean? Did her assumption that Harold did not count, that he was in fact out of the true line of Jean's development, correspond to a real Jean or to a Jean in whose composition memory played too large a part and imagination filled up the gaps of knowledge? One was terribly apt to fix one's friends in rôles of one's own invention, and force them to play the same, always; to allow no room for growth, above all for the growth one did not see, which proceeded along lines one would not have chosen. There had been moments on those May afternoons, lengthening on, often, into evenings, when they sat on talking in the summer dusk, when below her sparkle Roberta sensed a Jean who was not there, and not happy. Once, glancing at her, suddenly, and following, as she remembered, the direction of Stephen's all-observing gaze, she had caught an expression in her eyes that was terribly like the expression they wore now, that joined on to and foreshadowed this misery and had nothing to do with what she was saying at the moment. She talked: she talked freely and with animation, but always about impersonal, public things — never about herself. And now, as the picture rose from the past and

stood before her, she recalled that Jean's eyes had been turned to that part of the wall where her drawing of Harold then hung. Harold had not been mentioned among them until, after Stephen's last sitting, the question arose of what was to be done with the completed portrait. He had commissioned it, but did not, it seemed, want to keep it himself.

'I'm not unduly partial to my own countenance,' he said, laughing. 'Let me keep the advantage of not seeing it. I propose to give it to you.' His eyes were on Jean.

All she said was: 'But I have nowhere to hang it.'

'Oh, Esther will accommodate it,' he answered, on that.

Jean, however, shook her head. 'No,' she said. 'She's entered on a no-picture phase. You'll have to keep it in the mean time, Berta. Hang it up between those two.'

She pointed to the portion of the studio wall where the portrait which Harold, too, had refused to keep — odd that artistic efforts on both of them should have shared this common fate — hung side by side with the one of Sir Michael Henshaw, the original of a newspaper commission.

Stephen's brow drew down in a decided frown. His displeasure was obvious. He merely said, however:

'Pity you don't know old Claviger, Miss Darsy. Then the exhibition would be complete. You must get him up sometime, Jean, for the purpose. He's very nearly as handsome as my parent — though on more earthly lines.'

He tried, on this, to lead the conversation off. But Jean for some reason was inexorable: she indeed carried the hanging through, there and then. Now the drawings hung there, side by side — Harold and Stephen. There had been no time to move them, when, a month ago, Jean suddenly turned up on the doorstep and asked to be taken in: perhaps, indeed, it would have been more gross to move them than to

leave them. Anyhow, there they stayed: there they were at this moment.

They looked at her, in the morning, when she entered the studio, but she did not look at them. The early October sunshine was pouring in through the open windows, and the table, laid for breakfast, with the yellow roses Jean had given her yesterday, in its centre, looked attractive — as it always did when Jean set it: she had a feeling, which Roberta appreciated, for setting things straight — an art Roberta had not, over a long course of years, ever succeeded in conveying to the maid who had left her, more than a year ago now, to go into a munition factory. She had smelt the coffee as she dressed, and realized that, once again, Jean had risen well ahead of her and done all the household work. The swept and garnished look of the sun-steeped room suggested, indeed, that she had been up a long time: everything was in its place, and the studio as austerely orderly as she herself liked to keep it. From a selfish point of view, Jean was an ideal guest. She was a more than efficient substitute for the departed Ada; and she never left anything about in the studio, where Roberta could not bear to have even her own things lying about. This was the more remarkable because Jean was naturally untidy: had used, in the old days when they shared a room, to keep her own table in chaos and never could refrain from piling her music in heaps on or about the piano, nor often find, till after an exasperated hunt, the piece of it she wanted at the moment. She could not find it herself, and she did not like being helped. That indeed was her one great weakness: generous to a fault in giving, she was, always, less generous in taking — wanted always to be the giver, not the taker. But her tidiness in the studio was a thing that touched Roberta, who felt in it her

unaltered, steady consideration of others, still there, even now when she had every excuse for forgetting everybody but herself. There, on the table, by her own plate, was 'The Times,' opened and folded over in the middle; and the first thing she saw in it was not the short paragraph headed 'Last Night's Air Raid' or the sinister column below it, 'Another Batch of Casualties,' but, more prominent far than either, with its leaded heading and large-type setting, 'Claviger Case — Opening of Trial To-Day.' With an angry motion she picked the paper up, and threw it away from her onto the sofa.

Jean came in as she did so.

'Could you eat an egg? You'd better — you'll need support — and there's one of the good ones left... Look at your watch. I'm putting it on now — there's boiling water left over from the coffee.'

She disappeared again, but returned a moment later, carrying a tray with the two smoking jugs and the full toast rack. Roberta looked at her quickly: however well one knew a person, one went on imagining that his face would tell one what was going on in his mind; and Jean's was an expressive countenance. But of course it told her nothing. In her bright blue overall, she looked pale, but hardly paler than she generally did: if there were dark shadows under her eyes, most Londoners had them this morning — she had, she knew. About her aspect there was nothing pathetic: her features, though small, were firmly cut, and the curve of her mouth humorous rather than appealing. There was pride as well as courage in the way her small dark head was set on its rather long neck. Her face was not strictly pretty, though she could upon occasion look more than pretty: such claim to good looks as she had (and Roberta had heard her described as beautiful) really derived more from the grace

of her movements and the lovely balance of her perfectly proportioned frame than from any individual feature. She had that rare thing — an exquisite walk; and that, with the beauty of her contralto tones in speaking, created the impression of personal beauty on people who happened to feel those things. But in a place like Bluehills, for instance, it was possible that no one had ever seen her. Certainly she did not now, had not ever, looked as though she were sorry for herself.

'You haven't looked at the paper,' she said, as she sat down.

'No, you have, though...'

'Oh, yes, I have. What does it feel like? I can't tell you. I'm a complete failure, there. To me, it doesn't join on. I don't realize myself as Mrs. Claviger — the Mrs. Claviger of "The Times"; and what they call "the facts" aren't facts at all, to me. It's not that they are wrong — they leave everything out. Everything — I call it that, but... what is it? I can't get hold of it... It's like a tune you hear in your head, but can't get past your throat...'

Roberta glanced at her quickly: she was not getting on with her breakfast — that was her first piece of toast, and three-quarters of it was still on her plate.

'I wish you'd tell me...' she began.

'Honestly, if I could, I would. Only... I can't. I know I'm making it far worse for you by being like this — sort of mummified. But I can't unwrap. That day, in Stephen's room, a sheet of lead seemed to wind itself round and round me, and I haven't been able to get out of it since. Esther — the way she went on, screaming and howling and saying — all the things Mrs. Claviger ought to say — that soldered it up on me. And I can't get out. You know that sheet out of the Brahms that's got lost — I know it's there somewhere in

my pile at home; Cassie can't find it for me, I might not be able to find it myself if I were there — and yet I feel sure it *is* there. Look here, I'd better bring in the ham and cut you some sandwiches; I don't suppose you have much time for lunch, do you?'

'I don't know. I've never been to the Old Bailey before.'

'Neither have I. I've never been to a big case anyhow, only police-court ones. In Bluehills they finish off a whole row of people as quickly as ninepins. I've always rather wanted to go to a big trial.'

Roberta did not feel she could meet her eyes on this.

'But you don't want to go to-day?'

Jean looked out of the window. The sun was full on her face now, and her eyes as green as water. Nothing to be seen out of the window — only the offices opposite, and below, in the street, the rumour and rumble of carts, motors and people hurrying along to work, with papers in hands or pockets — papers full of the Claviger case.

'No — not just as an onlooker. Though waiting with nothing to do one's self is my idea of Hell, I'd rather wait here than there. I used to imagine that the people in the cold circle or even in the fiery one got used to it: Dante knew better. One's learned that, now. Besides, I told Hughes I wouldn't.'

'Oh, as far as that goes, if you put on that little pull-on hat of yours, right down over your face, Eden'd never see you.'

'Oh, no, I said I wouldn't.'

'He wouldn't know.'

'I should. Besides, Eden would — he'd feel it. And, apart altogether from him, I don't want to: I should have to listen to a heap of lies, and I couldn't tell the truth. Oh, not because of Eden — he thinks I know it, that's why he won't have me; but for all his cleverness, he's wrong there — it's

just what I don't know. And my going wouldn't help me. Yours, now, may. Your mind at least is clear.'

She was busy now, cutting the sandwiches — she made admirable sandwiches.

'It's a blank.'

'Yes, but a good blank — good strong white paper that would make a very fine screen. You can register what is given — I couldn't; I should mix it all up with the muddle in my own mind. Be sure you make a good drawing of the Judge for me, and of McClure — I've always admired McClure.'

She was now pressing down her sandwiches into a neat little pile, and, having collected a piece of paper, began doing them up into a parcel. Roberta watched her, marvelling at her neat dexterity, her apparent detachment: then, swallowing a final cup of coffee and glancing at her watch, she too rose, and, casting the end of her cigarette out of the window, came over to where Jean sat and stood for a moment beside her. She did not kiss her — she merely squeezed her shoulder with her hand as she went out. Returning with her large leather sketching-bag, she proceeded to pack the little parcel into it.

'Got your pass?' asked Jean.

Roberta held it out. 'I'd better be in good time, I suppose; Hughes's clerk — he's the person who really runs things, I gather — thought there'd be a crowd.'

'I expect there will.'

Roberta looked away from her, about the room. The sun had gained strength; it was positively hot now on one's face: a delicious heat, with no sultriness. The studio looked both charming and peaceful. Against the cool greys of its walls and furnishings, Jean, in her bright blue pinafore, standing now by the table, gathering the orange cups and plates to-

gether, neatly arranging spoons and knives in one pile, mats in another, with hands that were at once beautiful and capable, the strong light falling on her smooth dark hair, and drawing out the fragrance from the yellow roses, would have made a delightful subject.

'You look like a Vermeer,' she murmured.

Jean merely made a grimace. 'I know what you think of subjects for oil painting,' was all she said.

'Well, I'm off.'

'Right. I'll have supper ready for you when you get back. But don't worry over it all more than you can help. It's no sort of use, you know.'

CHAPTER II

I

THE studio door closed behind Roberta; then the outer door slammed — a deeper note; then, her steps clicking down the stone stairs. Jean stood, as she had left her, listening. Funny, the way those little sounds could be heard, in front of the noise that went on, the whole time, inside her head, which was so much louder and sharper and hurt the very walls of her brain. For the first time she seemed to know the anatomy of her own cranium. It was like a gramophone sound-box: the little needle went round and round the disc, on a path one could not follow, and made this fearsome racket, but the record never came to an end, the spring never ran down, there was no stopping the noise. She had tried every way she could think of, and none of them worked.

Perhaps, however, she had not been able to try hard enough, because it had taken all the strength of will and all the self-control she could summon merely to go on looking like a real person, and talking like a real person to other people. It had seemed somehow enormously important that they should not realize that she was not real any more.

Of other people the days had been intolerably full. First, there had been those crowding, unknown men who talked and asked questions, and wrote down things in black note-books with india-rubber straps — the men who had taken Harold away with them. They had for days followed her like a dark noisy cloud, from which she could not escape and inside of which she could not breathe. They had

broken in, once or twice, across the tornado of Esther Exton's ravings; then, after but a couple of hours of the blessed silence of Roberta's flat (to which she had escaped when Esther betook herself to Brighton), they had tracked her down there . . . and it had begun afresh. On top of them, interminable and futile conferences with Mr. Hughes, Mr. Claviger's solicitor, eyes and ears for the redoubtable J. F. Eden, K.C.: hour after hour, sitting at Mr. Hughes's table, looking at him, knowing that to try to say anything to him was vain, for, in proportion as she got near to a word that was truth for her, it was plainly bordering on unintelligibility for him; knowing, of course, that all that was really asked of her was not to get in his way, not to be there, not to interfere with his idea of presenting the case — whatever that might be. Throughout, looming behind him, Mr. Claviger: she had not seen him, but he had been there; once, indeed, she had even heard his voice in the next room and idly wondered if he were being physically restrained from coming in and murdering her. He at least could be trusted to have a clear view of the affair. Hughes, fortunately, had pretty soon dismissed her — and she understood without any words spoken between them that he trusted her to keep herself out of sight. She had done her best — but she had not been able to prevent everyone in the world she knew from remembering that they knew her. The telephone, it seemed, had never stopped ringing; and the front doorbell had not been much better, and as she had to answer both when Roberta was out or working — and Roberta was busy, while she had nothing to do — a great many of these people had talked to her. Certainly most of the talking had been done by them. It was easy to refrain from answering questions, since she did not know the answer. There was Muriel Payne — she had been the first to appear: busy as she was,

she had found time for that. Muriel was by way of being 'helpful': there was Neil, and there was Reggie, both people of importance, able to pull wires and practised in wangling: should she put either or both on the job? But, of course, really like all the others, she was there to look; her dinner-table conversation had to be brightened — and scandals from the inside either of Neil's Ministry of Munitions or Reggie's War Office were stale from constant repetition. This same motive operated with most of the others — and how poor the harvest of their assiduous garnering! Jean did not like them when they were with her, but after they had gone she felt sorry that so much energy should have yielded them so little. Then there was Agnes Lorbeer. Agnes, of course, was different, and much more difficult to cope with, for she came, out of the overflowing self-pity bred in her by her own entirely genuine grief for Arthur, to enfold Jean in her arms and mingle their tears together. And Jean had no tears. Agnes, she knew, found her hard and unfeeling, but at least she could not guess how much of envy there was behind that hardness. Jean had liked Agnes first at the time of Arthur's death: she had been with her then, and realized with a self-reproachful shock that the jazz life Agnes had till then been living was only a mask: she cared for Arthur to a degree that few could have guessed from her talk about him before, or the way she treated him — perhaps Arthur even had not guessed. Now, she was purified, even excessively purified: her exaltation made Jean feel as cold as Agnes thought her. No, Agnes did not make it real to her. She treated her as a widow, but even that did not reach her; how could she say to Agnes that Harold was no further off than he had been for a year? Agnes thought she was selfish. Probably she was. Pain made one bad — Stephen had been quite right there. But if to be selfish was to be unable to

think of anyone but one's self, she was not — for she could think of everybody else more easily.

It was actually about herself that she ought to think and she could not. Roberta would have made her selfish if she could: she knew she was thinking about her, puzzling over her, longing to help her, the entire time. She had been infinitely kind — kind above all in not uttering these thoughts of hers in words; but Jean knew they were there, and they irked her unspeakably. And Roberta was always there, and her mute sympathy was always there.

Now, however, at last, a day alone was before her; now, for the first time since it had happened, she had a stretch of waking hours ahead of her during which she was safe — all the people whose minds were occupied with her, one way and another, were by now locked up inside the Court; and she alone was left, here, outside of it. Here was her chance. By to-morrow evening, so Hughes's omniscient clerk had told Roberta, it would probably be what he called 'over.' She must, before that happened, get it straight; must somehow clear her chest of this appalling oppression, this strong yet obscure sense that she was to blame, or it would stifle her permanently and altogether. She had a feeling that its roots were deep in the past: somewhere, there, she had failed. But where? There was only one way of finding out — she must go back, right back, and tell herself her own story, like a novel. Surely she could do that — for the person in that story seemed to her, now, to have little or nothing to do with the Jean Claviger who waited in Roberta Darsy's studio for the slow hours to achieve inevitable calamity.

She looked about the familiar room, as though it might help her. It was very like Roberta, who worked preferably always in black and white, and with its grey walls, its polished floor, and its sparse but rather distinguished fur-

nishings, expressed her feeling for line and her rejection of colour. It expressed more than that — it expressed Roberta's evasions — the fact that in personal relations, as in her work, she played for safety. She said that she did drawings of faces only because portraits of themselves were the only 'works of art' for which people would pay. That was true. But she also felt drawings safe. The one challenging piece of furniture the studio contained was not the easel (it always lived with its back to the wall) or the Chinese lacquer screen (Roberta had been born in China, where her father still lived — deciding to remain there after his retirement from active service) in front of the fireplace, with the great bronze bowl of dried honesty behind it filling up the grate. No, it was the sofa; a sofa of the shape of the sofa on which Madame Récamier is seen reclining in David's famous portrait, covered with a horsehair that was not black but white — a white to which time had lent the rare tone of old ivory. And for the existence of that sofa Jean rather than Roberta was responsible. On her way home to the West Highlands from Dresden, where she was studying music, she had spent some days in Edinburgh with Roberta, then a student at the School of Art there; and on one of their walks together she had revealed the lovely object in the side window of an obscure shop. She had been watching it for weeks — too poor to buy it, yet longing for it with an intensity that took her back and back to the fatal window to gaze. Jean had never known her before as much moved by anything or as near to her own habit of reckless plunging — a habit on which Roberta, cautious by temper and full of the wisdom of five years' seniority, was apt to take her to task. They had stood looking at it; then Roberta was turning away. But she had held her back.

'It's destiny, Berta. You don't know what that sofa will

do for you. You need it — it will keep you always safe. With that in your room, whatever else is or isn't in it, you will always be a lady, you can hold any views you like. I see it doing wonders for you. You can look at it, any time you feel as blasphemous about drawing as I often do about playing, and it will reassure you — you will know that beauty is a real thing, not a phantom... Just look at the curve at the end — it's a poem. And I'm sure it's comfortable. Let's go in and sit on it — that will settle you.'

It did. It was at once firm and soft.

'It's beyond words comfortable — and without looking it. Things that look comfortable so seldom look anything else. But this— it's a sofa out of Paradise, where form and charm live together. The Platonic idea of sofa realized. You must have it.'

The old salesman had told them its history so far as he knew it; also its price. Its history convinced Jean that Burns had once sat on it or hung over the end. Its price looked large — but was much smaller than they had feared; and Jean insisted that her father would lend it to them.

'The utter uselessness of it will appeal to him, I know. Even without Burns — and that will settle him. I'll write.'

It did; and although he did not want to be repaid, he very soon was, for Roberta was persuaded to do a painting of the sofa, with Jean leaning over the end of it, in a yellow muslin dress — a composition so refined that it was hardly, Roberta declared, an oil at all. Sent in to the Royal Scottish Academy, it was accepted and, more miraculous still, sold. The sofa Roberta, with characteristic magnanimity, always called 'your sofa.'

Yes, the sofa was full of happy memory; but above it, on the wall, there hung that row of drawings at which she had not looked yet, but which she could see without looking.

They were what the studio had for her, and it was time — more than time — she did look. She knelt on the sofa, and, raising her eyes, fixed them resolutely on the two drawings in the centre of the long row.

She remembered how she had angered Stephen and perplexed Roberta by insisting that the drawing she had just completed of him should hang there beside the one she had done, a year earlier, of Harold. There had been some idea in her mind then that the juxtaposition would bring Harold back into focus in her mind, yet she had almost at once regretted her insistence: it was the sort of thoughtless, selfish thing she was always doing, especially where Stephen was concerned. With his infernal cleverness he would realize, almost before she did, that, while her suggestion looked cruel, the target of that cruelty was Harold, not him. For the drawing of him was as excellent, as vital, as that of Harold was poor and dead. The reason was simple — Roberta had been keenly interested in Stephen while she was drawing him, and not a bit interested in Harold. Perhaps handsome people were more difficult to draw, just as good people were more difficult to analyse: Harold presented both difficulties. Roberta, an intellectual of the contemporary type, thought goodness dull and unadventurous; she probably put Harold down as stupid. Roberta's drawing made him look conventional, with the result that it was no more like Harold than the photograph in 'The Times' — a reproduction of that dreadful smug shiny thing he had had taken in Bluehills before he went out early in 1915. Of course his features were there — his square brow, under the thick, low-growing, mouse-coloured hair, made squarer by the placing of his wide-apart eyes, his straight nose, his very short lower lip and strongly projecting chin with its deep cleft; but there was so little of the real Harold in the face that she could, and

did, look at it coldly, remotely, with no feeling whatsoever. This was not the face that had frozen her during his last leave; that she had felt but not seen on the day of catastrophe and on that atrocious afternoon when she had gone to the prison — her mind dropped an iron shutter over that, automatically: about that, no thinking was possible for her — yet — still less was it the living face of the Harold of the happy past. A stranger regarded her from the wall; she could look back at him, and feel nothing. No — the drawing held nothing for her: there was no power in it to wake her to reality.

With that of Stephen it was different. Him she could almost hear speak. Incredible, that she should never hear him speak again. Stephen was dead. Dead, he was going to kill Harold, who had killed him. That was what the Court today, now at this very moment sitting, was assembled for: thither a crowd had hurried, for a show as exciting to them as any gladiatorial display of Roman times — to kill Harold because he had killed Stephen. She tried to visualize it, to call it up in images that would rouse her to some real sense of its terrific actuality. Murder; Harold a murderer; Stephen murdered by him; Harold, with the gallows looming before him — the eyes that would not see her looking at that. Not surprising if eyes so aligned did not see her. But long before that Harold had not been seeing her, and his unseeing eyes had petrified her, so that, now, she could see nothing — not even him.

A sharp ring — the front doorbell — interrupted her. She rose at once, moved across the room and out into the passage to answer it. Roberta had murmured something on going out, advised her not to pay any attention either to this or to the telephone bell, but she had not taken it in. Taken it in! What did she take in nowadays? Food — that seemed all.

For some reason she still ate and drank. It would have worried Roberta if she had not done so.

On the mat there stood a young man, with a pleasant countenance, neatly dressed in blue serge. She did not know him, but he looked like someone she might have known. A cultivated voice, nicely modulated, murmured: 'Mrs. Claviger?'

She regarded him vaguely. A pity that his shoes were so bright a shade of tan. What did he want? Of course, to look at her, to ask her questions, to get something out of her. She had had a great deal of practice in this particular game. She shook her head. 'This is Miss Darsy's studio — Miss Darsy is out,' she said.

The young man made a politely deprecating motion of his hand.

'Yes, yes, I know. But we understand that Mrs. Claviger is here.'

'We' — the Press, of course. She said nothing. That was after all nearly always the most effective technique. Dull, but effective.

'I should very greatly appreciate a few words with her.'

She still said nothing, only looked at him, the handle of the door in her hand. He dived into his pocket and extended a card. She did not take it; she merely continued to look at him.

'I am sorry — but as I told you Miss Darsy is out. She won't be back till this evening.'

'And Mrs. Claviger?' His manner was as ingratiating as he knew how to make it, but he was too well-bred.

'I know nothing about Mrs. Claviger. Good-morning.'

He looked baffled, and she felt a pang of sympathy for him. Poor young man, he was too good for this game. She repressed an inclination to help him, since, as it was, he

would get into trouble for returning empty-handed. But although he must suspect her, he could not know: there had been no photographs of her in the papers; Mr. Eden had decided to eliminate Mrs. Claviger, and she had been eliminated.

'Mrs. Claviger? I know nothing about Mrs. Claviger,' she said to herself, as though repeating some incantation, as she walked back into the studio. It was quite true. Was there such a person? Had there ever been? In the act of packing the breakfast things — still on the table in their neat little piles — onto a tray, she caught sight of her own hands. There they were: they were real enough; they were the same hands she had looked at, used, for nearly thirty years. They had been through it all. They had plucked bog myrtle in Moragh and carried it in to her father for the funny little stone jar that always stood on his writing-table; they had held Harold's and felt for the first time that a hand was an exciting thing, that thrilled when it was touched, felt queer and electric, sent currents right through to your centre; they had fingered that harsh, unpleasant stuff out of which Cassie Claviger had been making covers for cushions, when she suddenly broke out and talked for the first time; poor Zillpah's hot tears had fallen over them when Jimmy Dalton was 'taken'; Stephen had gripped one of them so that it hurt when he told her that Harold was like everyone else and she ought not to mind it. That white line on the first finger of her left hand was a cut she had got out fishing with Harold in the week after their first meeting. In seven years, they said, everybody changed completely; but that was seven years ago and the mark of the cut was still there. Her hands knew. They were there, unaltered: life still coursed along their veins and arteries; the sinews were still as strong as ever; she could still play the piano with them,

and bring out the old notes. Something that was Jean Claviger was there, and would go on being there, whatever happened to her mind. And, somehow, she had got to get the life that still lived in her fingers back into her mind.

She looked up again at Stephen's picture. There seemed, now, to be a gleam of the old familiar mockery glinting at her from his eyes. Roberta had been brilliantly successful with his eyes — under those surprising, exaggeratedly dark thick eyebrows they looked out, as they had done in life, like sword-points: when one met or even saw those eyes, one easily forgot the rest of his face — the curiously weak chin tucked away under the long crooked nose, even the mouth that had at times curves positively Satanic. If she could talk to Stephen about it, through the thrust and parry of conversation with him she would end by making out answers to her riddles. He had been the most wonderful person to talk with; then, his very shamelessness, the fact that he invariably put the questions that no decent person did put, said things that you hated to hear, could never let any sleeping dog, public or private, lie, had a nose which led him infallibly to the bone you thought you had so safely buried away from your own observation or his — all this meant that talk with him was real, always; painfully real, often. Why had she never, until that very last hour, talked to him or let him talk to her about Harold? Let him talk? Would he not have talked, uncontrollably, if he had wanted to? If Stephen had been silent about Harold, there must have been reasons of his own for that reticence, reasons with which her wishes had nothing to do. Yes — there must; but it was not in them she was interested; nor was she going to allow herself, now, to find excuses for herself in that. That Harold had not until that last hour been mentioned between them was her doing. She had willed it so. That Stephen, for other

reasons of his own, had willed it too did not exonerate her. Nor in her case had her silence been loyalty to Harold. She had been disloyal to him in her mind in all that time, for she had tried to forget him; had, so far as conscious thought went, succeeded in forgetting him. She had enwrapped him in silence, prevented any light from Stephen's mind from playing on him — because she was afraid. And, in the same way, and perhaps for the same reason, her talk with Stephen had always, so far as her part in it went, been about the present. About the Committee and its work; she had drugged, hypnotized herself with that. Stephen had spoken of his parents — his father was one of his constant themes, and a very fluent one — about Bluehills, even about the elder Clavigers; but she, even in listening to him, had always shifted the time, as though she were turning the hands of a watch, from *then*, so far as it touched her or Harold — in the past it was the same thing — to *now*. How silly! For *then* must be capable of illuminating *now:* it was, in truth, in *then* that the key to *now* was somehow hidden; there was something she had done or not done then that had changed Harold, and made him what he had become by his second leave. That the Harold of *then* should have shot Stephen was inconceivable; but the Harold of that second leave was the Harold of *now* who had done it, and whose doing it had no power to shock or stir her. Stephen might have explained the Harold of *then* to her. She had wasted the time when he might have done so. Now he could not; she had to do it by herself.

Looking at the drawings was of no use. She lifted the tray and carried it into the kitchen. The breakfast things disposed of, there were preparations for a meal to be made against Roberta's return home. She took longer than was necessary on both these operations: was meticulous in her

tidying of the little kitchen, devised a pudding that involved elaborate fresh washing-up of pastry-board, pans, and knives; did, now, things that could very well have been left till later; and knew that the whole of this was merely an artificial and protracted postponement. Yet underneath her meaningless activities, some detached part of her mind was working like a mole. 'And one was kind, oh! why not kind to me?' — the silly line rang in her head. Now, as when in those horrible days in January in that vile jazzy hotel, many months ago, it had suddenly taken possession there, she quoted it wrong. Of course, the real word was 'true,' but 'kind' it had always been in her inaccurate mind. Harold's truth she might talk to herself and him of doubting, but it was his kindness she really longed for and had really lost. That he had murdered Stephen — yes, let her use the most dreadful word she could find — was not what crushed her; that fact really was irrelevant to her feelings about him. The death of his kindness was the centre and focus: when her thought got near to that, the numb nerve of pain throbbed intolerably. How frightful! Stephen murdered, Harold his murderer — at that she could look, as if it had nothing to do with her; but Harold aloof, dead to her, unkind — that turned her too to the stone he had become.

> Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet;
> If it could weep, it would arise and go.

That was what he was like now: that was what she had felt, when she saw him in prison. It had been so terrible that his refusal to see her again (coldly communicated to her through Hughes, who, she felt, enjoyed watching how she took it) added little. That was Harold, now.

But there was another Harold, and she must find him. She must push back, back through the dark mazes of the

obliterating present, to the past... that past of hers and his that now seemed to belong to two other people; tell herself the story that she might have told to Stephen, resolutely re-live the years that had been theirs, since on no other terms could she hope to find him whom she had lost.

She was back in the studio now, on the sofa. She closed her eyes, leaned back. Fatal action — her head was a mere sounding-board again. Ridiculous that, while she had apparently no power to realize what it meant, she should incessantly hear that fatal shot, feel its reverberations along her nerves, see the powder blackening her clothes, feel the blood spurting up onto her face, all hot and sticky, and stare stupidly, as she had done at the time, at that dark figure standing before her which was Harold and yet not Harold. No, this was hopeless. She opened her eyes. She remembered that, when she was working in Lady Henshaw's hospital, one of the other nurses, hearing that she was unable to sleep, had put her through a control exercise. 'First stretch all your muscles, like a cat — yes, that's right; then relax them all one by one, concentrating your mind on each in turn; then, call up, with all your imagination, some sensation of heat or colour... Or perhaps, for you, with your unfortunate nose,' the girl had said, laughing, 'some smell would be best.' For a time she had practised this; then, as she got used to the smells and sights and sounds of hospital — for she had, like the others, got used to them — it had not been necessary: she had been so tired physically in those days that she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. But exhaustion did not seem to help her nowadays: perhaps it would be worth while to try the exercise again. Religiously, she followed the prescribed order; stretched, then let her muscles go loose, relaxed her limbs on the sofa, as though she were lying on a heather bed. Heather — the smell of heather, distilling its

pollen in the sun, of crushed bog myrtle, of a peatstack somewhere, of the earth, warm beneath her... The sun was streaming in through the window onto her, and now the images her imagination called up took form and hold... Moragh, Moragh: yes, she was there: she saw it as she had done in the June when she came home from Dresden — as she had thought for good — to live with her father. Dresden had given her music for herself; it had also taught her that her playing, though good, was not so good that it must be given to the world. Moragh was not new then: her father, to the amaze of his professional colleagues, had made his home there on the wild fringes of the Western isles, four years earlier, and argued with them, since, only by correspondence, over the interpretation of obscure passages in Pindar; but until then she had only been there for brief holidays, since, so he told her, she had to be old enough and educated enough to know that she liked solitude before she had it as her home. That June, however, she had looked at it with glad possessive eyes: the eyes of a person to whom it belonged. She had, happy as she was in Dresden, longed for it and for her father; for the visit her father had paid her the previous summer, when he had come out to Germany instead of her coming home to Scotland, had revealed him to her as an ideal companion — the best person to do things with she had known, until she met Harold; and with Harold it was all so different. Her father, like her, was vague and incompetent with trains and maps; they were for ever getting lost and turning up in places where they had not meant to be — but what fun that was! And he knew everything about the past of every place, no matter how unexpected; and would sit down and tell her stories as fascinating as any novel — stories that made the world seem so old and dense that it almost dizzied her: stories that really went straight into music in her head —

but music she could not write. He did not care about music, which was odd; but she found he had built a music room for her, as an annex to the funny little stone house; and the garden was blooming with the flowers she loved the most. She felt more sure than ever that he and she were to live there always.

Actually she had lived there for four months. She had come home in June: it was only in September, that morning on which, walking back over the moor from seeing her father off by the steamer on a most unusual excursion to Glasgow, she had first seen Harold. She had walked slowly, mooning along, as her father would have told her, for it was one of those mornings that go to one's head. There had been a touch of frost during the night, and the mountains, their basalt outlines etched sharp against the skyline, were blue-black; the wind had an edge like wine, and before it great cloud masses moved in a continual changefulness of gracious forms against a canopy of vivid ultramarine; the heather still held in its bells myriads of sparkling, multi-coloured diamond dewdrops, evaporating quickly in the sun's hot eye, which brought out the intoxicating scent of the hidden honey the bees were extracting from their secret stores. Far down below, she could see the loch glassy as a mirror: the reflections of the mountains in it hardly moved; down there, under the shelter of the hillside, there seemed to be no wind — an effect she had known only at Moragh. Picking the first blooms of grass of Parnassus she had met this year, she moved slowly along the bed of the stream; then, suddenly, coming round a sharp bend in its course which held a sheltered sunny patch of heather, where she often sat, she had come upon Harold, asleep on one of the soft hummocks. At Moragh one never met anyone; yet she had not been surprised to see him. She had stood looking down at him as

he slept, as though she had had foreknowledge of his being there, had already met him in some dream. He slept quietly; his nostrils hardly seemed to move; his short thick dark eyelashes, several shades darker than his hair — he wore no cap — lay still as a child's on his bronzed cheek; even the half-smile that curved his sleeping mouth had something child-like. But what was strangest then was that he looked as though he belonged, not only to the sunshine, but to *that* sunshine. When he opened his eyes, he showed no more surprise at seeing her than she had felt at seeing him. He did not say anything: he just looked at her, not sleepily, but with bright, wide-open eyes (not blue as she had somehow expected, but grey; the purest grey, with no blue in them) that seemed to take her for granted, to expect her, to know her. It had not been embarrassing at the time, that long friendly gaze of his: he was simply taking her in. Yes, he had taken her in, then, and never let her go since.

After a moment they were talking together, not about anything particular, but with the easy simplicity of two people who have known each other always. He, it seemed, was on a walking-fishing tour; had come by foot, over the ferries, all the way from Glasgow.

'A friend and I came north from Lancashire by car — he's a lazy fellow; starts out well, but hankers for his driving wheel in no time. He discovered a blister at Crianlarich, so I came on by myself.'

The companion had, in fact, been Stephen Henshaw. Harold talked on about him, told her how wonderful he was. She had listened to his voice — his voice was beautiful — rather than to what he was saying, so long as he talked of Stephen. Him, as it happened, she did not meet for two years after that. At the time she did not regret his dropping out; in the first days of her later — Bluehills — acquaintance

with him, indeed, it had been difficult for her to see why Harold liked him. Stephen and Moragh did not go together; but Harold and Moragh did, perfectly. In the next two days he showed her places in it she had never known before, and, with him as companion, it looked more beautiful than it had ever done.

Dr. Farquhar's return authenticated their friendship. As a rule, she felt that to pass the test of her father's eyes was an ordeal to which she submitted her friends with a certain degree of apprehension. Not that he said anything; only she knew when he thought them trifling. As to what he was going to think of Harold, she had no apprehension; she took it for granted that he would accept him, just as she did, as, in some unexplained and unexplainable way, right. He did; from the first they more than pleased each other. She and her father had been sitting in the porch with their coffee, looking out at the sunset over the loch, on the evening of his return from Glasgow. Through the silence there came up to them a sound — the crunch of footsteps on the stones of the path that led from the house to Archie Durance's cottage, and a soft whistling.

'What's that?' asked Dr. Farquhar.

'The tune?' asked Jean maliciously — her father did not know one tune from another. 'The Bird Song from "Siegfried" — or meant to be.'

He smiled. 'And Siegfried himself is approaching Brunhilde's rock, eh? Got through the fire in Wotan's absence? Dear, dear... You see I took in something from that bath of opera you gave me — you thought I was asleep, I know.'

'He's an engineer actually,' said Jean quickly, as the sounds drew near. 'On a walking tour. Archie's put him up, so you can see he's all right. Funnily enough, he does look

rather like Siegfried — I hadn't thought of it, but it is so.'

In another moment he appeared; he sat down with them; after the first words of interchange, he said little; he merely looked, as they were looking, at the sunset. He fitted in. Later, he and her father talked; and Jean knew they liked each other. Her father said nothing — but his saying nothing had all sorts of accents, and the accent of this was of a kind to send her to bed happy. First Archie, now her father: two angles, widely different, but both equally certain in their power to reject any sort of sham.

Moragh, always beautiful, had never looked so beautiful as it did in those September days. She and her father had, now and then, had people to stay with them who saw little or nothing in it — wondered why they buried themselves there; and such people the place seemed to resent; it lost lustre under their unseeing eyes. Under Harold's it gained lustre. He did not insult it by praise; he simply fitted into it, as he did into their life and their affection. Not many words came back to her from this time; she could find no 'moment' at which she had realized that she loved Harold or he had told her that he loved her. His power of taking things for granted was immense; even when the day came on which he took her in his arms, he did not say much. Only he laughed, and his laughter was lovely in her ears. Dr. Farquhar did not pretend to be surprised. He looked at them, with his head a little on one side, when they came in; took Harold's hand in his and shook it hard; let her kiss him. Then, with a smile, he said:

'It's a long way from Moragh to Lancashire; and unless Lancashire has greatly changed since I knew it, which I don't somehow expect, a very different climate.'

Harold evidently understood. 'I know, sir. I'll try to remember that, too.'

Refusing to be pathetic about the loss of his daughter, Dr. Farquhar ridiculed the idea of a long engagement.

'I met your mother three months before we married,' he reminded Jean. Two years later, she had died in childbirth: Jean had never known her. 'Either you know, or you don't,' he went on. 'Living together is the only way of learning how to live together. Long engagements make it more, not less, difficult. Some people will tell you that caring much makes it more difficult. Perhaps it does. But it also makes it worth while. Don't give up your music, Jean: I know really that you won't do that — you can't. But what I have in mind is this. You, like me, have got a quick tongue and say things that hurt if one doesn't realize that, by the time they're said, the speaker's mind is merely thereby cleared of the poison, and has gone on to something else. I realize that, because I'm like you. But Harold isn't. He won't understand. He means what he says. So, play it on the piano first. I often say it in Greek first, and by the time I've done that, I see that it's anyhow a silly thing to say.'

She had nodded; she had thought she understood; then, at two and twenty, she had thought she understood everything, had felt so old and wise,— an error of which even her father, who really was both, had not been able to cure her. As for imagining what living in Bluehills was going to be like, she had been miles away from any power to do that. But what did it matter? If Harold had said, 'We are going to live at Timbuctoo,' she would only have laughed, delightedly. The thought of living in Bluehills had no terrors — was she not going to live with Harold? The future was at once dizzily exciting and utterly safe. When he asked her, one day, whether she was not afraid, she shook her head.

'Of you? Oh, no — how could I be?'

'No, not of me: I know you're not. But — it's so hard not

to hurt people. You'll know, at least, that I never mean to. But I'm stupid: I may. You must tell me if I do, for that's what I couldn't bear. Your mind is quick, mine slow: you'll find me awfully limited, after your father. And that isn't all. There's something I must tell you: I ought to have told you before.'

She had looked at him sitting beside her among the heather, on that, and tickled his ear with a harebell stalk; it was not like him to talk like a man in a play — was he going to tell her there had been 'someone else'? In any sense that mattered she knew there hadn't. Harold often followed her unspoken more easily than her spoken thoughts: he said, at once:

'It isn't what you perhaps think. It's only that we aren't going to be able to live in a separate house, and that's going to be very hard for you — hard all the time, not just at first. I hadn't realized it, really, till I saw how people *can* live together — how you and your father do. I do now. But it can't be helped. There are my mother and my sister — and so long as my father lives (and he's terribly strong), there's nothing else to be done.'

'How do you mean, Harold? Do explain to me — you haven't told me anything about them before. I never knew you had a sister — that's really rather a nice thing for me. And your father — I expect I shall like him, too.'

But Harold shook his head. 'I'm afraid not.'

He stopped there; she asked him, foolishly enough: 'Don't you?'

'No. I dare say that sounds horrible, to you — but you'll understand when you see them. My father is in many ways rather a remarkable man. He went into the mills at twelve, as a piecer: no education, nothing to help him. He worked tremendously: he's a great worker still: indeed he hardly ever

stops — except to drink, and he can carry more drink than most: you'll never know he's drunk, except that when he is he's just a devil. Especially with women. Yes: that's it. When I was at Cambridge he used to bring them into the house — I found that out one time when I was home.'

'Oh, poor Harold, how awful for you!'

'For me? For my mother, you mean. And my eldest brother, George: it was that did for him; he made a shocking mess of things, and father finally turned him out. I don't think even my mother knows, really, where George is now. She's got nobody but me.'

She wondered, as he said this, about his sister — she did not seem to count. None of it sounded real to her, then: it was too completely outside her experience.

'I'm really a wretch,' Harold went on. 'For, here, I forgot about all that. I used to feel, you know, that I couldn't ever marry: it seemed so unfair to my wife. But when I saw you I forgot. Until it was too late — I couldn't do anything about it. I did fight with myself — twice, three times, I was going away early in the morning without saying a word. But I couldn't. C'est plus fort que moi. That's all.'

She took his hand on this.

'And if you had gone, do you suppose I should just have let it happen? But what a horrible time you must have had! It is really going to be better now, isn't it?'

'Oh, for me... for me, of course, it's going to be the difference between Hell and Heaven. But for you I'm afraid my Heaven may be terribly like Hell. You don't, you can't know what it's like. Those two women — it's heart-breaking: they're so afraid. There have been times when I felt like murdering my father. There are hideous stories in the town — you'll hear them, I'm afraid. Think of your father and mine...'

'You'll be there, won't you?'

'Oh, Jean!' was all he said.

After a moment she remarked: 'Do you know, I don't think we'll tell father about this. He'll never see it, and he's so tender-hearted it would only make him unhappy. He'd be awfully sorry for you — but he likes you quite enough as it is; and this bit I think I shall keep for myself.'

Harold had looked at her — a long, strange look, that seemed to go on for ever and ever. And they had said nothing to Dr. Farquhar.

II

THEY had been happy. For four years. Looking back over it now, Jean found it hard, even to herself, to describe or localize that happiness. It was an atmosphere, not a thing: she had to go to music and away from words or visual images to get its feel. The incidents that stood out in memory, like the circumstantial background of their life, could be described, but the description would be subtly yet definitely wrong. It would give the islands — rocky, often, and not much overgrown with flowers — but not the sea in which they floated, by which they were often submerged, in which they were, really, insignificant. Bluehills: the Claviger family: the house they lived in: the work that Harold did and she tried to do: the people they saw in the streets or met when they went out to dinner: that could, like certain 'events' by aid of which one recollected the sequence of time, be remembered and given some sort of specific outline in description afterwards. But that was external and irrelevant. The reality of those years was somewhere else.

Happiness cannot be anatomized: it resists analysis and refuses to be recorded. There came back now merely some of the odd, fortuitous moments in which she had, suddenly,

realized it. For instance, there was that moment with the Extons, quite late on. Curious that it should be connected with them. Esther (Esther Crey then) had been at Dresden with Jean, and dreamed of being a great singer. Her voice, however, was quite inadequate to her dreams, and the career she had 'given up' to marry Claude existed only in her retrospective imagination. It was a conversational asset, no more, with her; no one believed in it save Claude: he was as stupid as that. Otherwise, he was a good fellow — indeed, a much better fellow than Esther — who had married him for his money: he had a great deal — deserved. Harold and he got on, wonderfully; Harold always got on with people who were genuine, and Claude was absolutely genuine. As a Member of Parliament he was, of course, absurd; but as a country squire, his simple, good-natured kindliness made him, in action, more than respectable. Their house in Kent had a divine garden: Claude was by no means stupid at gardens. After a sleepifying motor drive down from London, followed by a large tea, Jean drifted out into that garden by herself and dropped into a hammock slung between two gnarled apple trees, well away from the house.

It was one of those September days when the sun shines on with strong level light as it moves towards the west. The wind that had bustled and buffeted them on the road had died away, and now every leaf hung in a trancelike stillness, and every flower seemed to be expanding to catch the last of the warm radiance that steeped the air. Through the grey-green tracery of the leaves she could see the sky — a sky of that intense blue that is called Italian, though it quivered with a limpid atmospheric quality that is rarely seen in the South — and, startlingly red against the blue and green, round red apples hanging: so red that they looked as though they must, like balls of fire, be hot to the touch.

Beyond, to the right, stood a drift of delicate aspens, their trembling leaves held in a miraculous stillness; nearer to her, across the golden green of the grass, behind the vivid mass of the nasturtiums, ranks of snapdragons, rich red, brown, golden-purple, a belated orange admiral flitting in and out of their honey-bags. Looking up, idly counting the red apples, and never bringing out their number twice the same, she sighed with a deep content. Harold, she murmured to herself, is like this apple tree: just to perceive him, to know that he is there — that is happiness. No more than the apple tree could he or happiness be taken to pieces. Something deep in one — the deepest thing one had — rose and saluted something deep in him. Even to him there was no talking about it — and no need to talk. And there were people who saw nothing in him: friends of hers who thought she had thrown herself away on a commonplace man who lived in Lancashire. Their obtuseness added to her deep content. There was Esther coming out of the house now: she owned this garden but did not see it; she would not so much as notice the red apples against the grey-green leaves and the sapphire sky.

Esther was full of talk, about herself, and incidentally about Claude, as a way back to herself.

'Everything is so simple to Claude — he has no imagination. He's like a map with hardly anything on it. There's no adventure in being married to him — you can see what it will be like, from start to finish. But marriage is like that. When we were in Dresden, do you know, I thought of it as a door into real life. Of course it's just the opposite. It shuts doors, not opens them. There you are, and there you stay.'

Jean smiled. 'I like that.'

'Of course, Harold has far more temperament than Claude.'

Jean laughed. 'He'd not be flattered if you said so.'

'Yes, but he has. He might break out in some new place. So might I. Claude, never. I feel stifled. Of course I'm fond of Claude in a way... but it's not living.'

'Oh, come — you might have to live in Bluehills.'

Esther nodded, her china blue eyes round. 'Yes — I can't know how you do it... I've never been there, but one knows what those provincial towns are like. It must be too awful.'

Jean stared up at the apples. 'It is pretty bad — for the others, but I can see a red apple...'

Esther stared. 'What are you talking about? So can I. What has that to do with it? Oh, Jean, how ridiculous — are you as fond of him as all that, still?'

Jean merely grinned. The colour on the apples was growing more marvellous every moment; there was one, now, that was orange...

'You, of all people! You always seemed to me rather an exciting person. Harold — he's nice, of course, and very good-looking; but you couldn't call him exciting. And, anyhow — day after day... For a bit, of course, it's all right; but when you get used to it...'

'That's just what I haven't done. I'm not in the least used to Harold... Only, sometimes, in the night, it occurs to me that he might die before me. That's too frightful — I just shut off my mind.'

'You are in love, still!' Esther repeated. Her tone was pitying — it was as though she said, 'You've still got the measles.' Plainly, on that, she dismissed Jean as an ignorant and uninteresting child. That done, she was free to analyse and expound her own unhappiness, which she did with eager virtuosity. Jean, still absorbedly contemplating her apple, and much too happily engaged on that to attend very carefully to what Esther was saying in her flat, toneless voice,

was not called upon to contribute anything more until she found that Mrs. Exton was giving her a description of Stephen Henshaw.

'It sends shivers up and down my spine just to look at him — dreadfully ugly, but you soon forget that, he's so fascinating, and clever — beyond words. He's an extreme Radical — Claude, of course, can't bear him, but I go to the House just to watch him and hear him speak. He's an amazing speaker. Poor old Claude — he thinks I'm beginning to be interested in politics. You may know him; he comes from your part: yes, he's actually M.P. for Bluehills. His father — Sir Michael Henshaw, you know, the man who knows all about the Hittites, whoever they may be, and has done all sorts of wonderful excavating — has a place there, I think. Do you know him?'

Jean explained that she did: that Harold and Stephen had been at college together and ever since great friends. They did not see him often; he was always in London: Harold had hoped to see him this week-end, had gone up to his flat to look for him, but found him away.

'Oh, yes,' said Esther. 'I could have told you that — he's in Berlin. I had a wire from him, just now. I can't tell you what that man makes me feel...' She proceeded to expound it, at length; the light had faded from the scarlet apples, and the air turned suddenly chill, before she had finished.

In the evening the moon rose, and at night, as Jean and Harold stood together by the window, looking out, she asked him whether he could draw a portrait of her.

'I can't draw, except a blue-print,' said Harold literally. 'I could make a catalogue of features, but the result wouldn't be a face, let alone yours.'

'What I mean is, can you explain to yourself why you like me? You do, don't you?'

'I do, quite a lot. Too much, I sometimes think. I'm content — a shocking state, one's given to believe. I ought to be full of ambition, and eager to make money like the other folk in Bluehills — or a name for myself — whatever that may mean: to get into the papers, I suppose; why I can't imagine. But I'm not. I'd like to reconstruct our mills and alter a heap of things in the way we run them, and I shall when I get a chance. But that's about all. And sometime, when you are quite strong again, I'd like a boy and a girl, especially a girl.'

'Why, especially?'

'Oh, she'd be like you, silly. And I'd like to give a girl a chance — call her Cassie, you know. But you look very thoughtful. What is it?'

'I don't know. But there seems to be something odd about us, Harold. The parts of our life I could tell other people about make them sorry for us. You know — "nice young people, but don't even live in their own house, but in his parents' — and in Bluehills." And they don't even know how awful Bluehills is. All that — they pity us. And the real part of our life — I can't tell them about it. And I feel I ought to be able to, so that they could have it too. For it isn't — you know what I mean — any merit of ours. Not of mine, at any rate. Perhaps of yours.'

He shook his head.

'You can't explain anything that matters. Could you explain music? You've given it to me — but not by telling me about it. Or why the mist over those fields is beautiful and not dreary?'

He had been right, of course; yet it had troubled her at the time that she was unable to explain her happiness even to herself. And now this unexplainable quality seemed to be part and parcel of the fact that, although it had been, it was

now gone. If she could have understood, might she not have kept it? What Harold said about music was true; nevertheless, there were pieces, there were even composers, that, on a given day, said nothing to her ear, and yet were safe because once she had surely known why and in what way they were beautiful. She did not want to hear Wagner, for instance, at present; but Wagner was there, and one day she should come back and find him. That was what one meant by talking about a 'treasure in Heaven.' But their happiness, it seemed, had no heavenly mansion: was it not gone as though it had never been?

Perhaps it was idle to attempt to get at it directly: perhaps, to feel the sea in which the islands were set, one must look, not at it, but at the islands. There was, to begin with, Claviger House. It bore another name on the ornate gateposts, but no one in Bluehills ever called it anything but that. It looked just like the other houses round the park, but was it conceivable that they resembled it within? When she first knew it, she had often rubbed her eyes and asked herself, 'Is this England? Is this what goes on in these quiet, secure, comfortable-looking houses, in which one would have said that nothing ever happened?' In spite of what Harold had said, she came upon it utterly unprepared. They had been married at Moragh — no one in the little kirk but her father: Harold had refused to have any of his friends, since his mother, he said, could not come; and they went abroad for their honeymoon to Munich and Styria. Her father had told her she had music to give Harold; they went to opera and they walked. She never told her friends about their honeymoon — it would not have been fair. Then, after a night in London, Bluehills — the dark blur of the station, the dark climb up the hill, and Claviger House. Its ugliness, without and within, was something to which none of her

anticipations had been in the least adequate: but of its inhabitants her first impressions were much less dark than Harold's brief hints had suggested. It was surprising, since Harold spoke the same English that she and her father did, to hear both his parents speak with a strong Lancashire accent; but Mr. Claviger, a big burly man, over six feet in height, had, over and above his handsome features and fine eyes, the personal distinction of bearing that the successful do not always achieve, and his talk, full of a shrewd humour, had a forthright directness that, on top of his apparent approval of herself, positively attracted her to him. She would have been inclined to dismiss what Harold had said had it not been for the fact that the two women at the table — they had arrived in time for a curious meal, something between tea and dinner, with which she was later to become very familiar — hardly opened their lips. Mrs. Claviger, small and pallid, with white hair smoothly drawn down on either side of a face etiolated by suffering, aroused her tenderest, most protective instincts. With no recollection of her own mother, she was prepared to idealize the relationship. Cassie alone corresponded to what her husband had led her to expect, and Mrs. Claviger's tone to her, in the few remarks then exchanged between them, did not fit in well with this extemporized idealization of maternal sweetness. Cassie, with her vacant eyes, muddy skin, and hands rough as those of a servant, looked half-witted; she sat at table, but neither her father nor mother took any notice of her except to order her to fetch this or that in a tone such as few servants would have tolerated. Harold spoke to her conversationally; no one else. She was, Jean knew, older than her brother, and looked far older; but her blank expression was that of an immature girl. Even on that first evening Cassie gave her the creeps.

Upstairs with Harold, on the second floor of the big house, which was their own domain, she forgot Cassie, and said to him:

'Of course it is going to be all right. It's not half as alarming as I feared... They will leave us alone — that's the great thing.'

Harold had looked at her rather curiously on that, but all he said was: 'Yes; they'll do that.'

Next day, at the midday meal, when she got down to the dining-room, Harold, Mrs. Claviger told her, had telephoned from the works that he could not get back till evening. She looked white in the face, shaken, even frightened. The reason soon appeared. Mr. Claviger's voice, raised in furious rage, could be heard outside, storming at Cassie; he was still storming when he came in, using language such as Jean had never heard, shaking his fist, almost purple in the face. Cassie hardly raised her eyes: she showed neither resentment nor surprise. He roared like a bull; he smashed his fist down on the table so that the glasses sprang; when, with a fatuous notion of breaking the storm, Jean spoke to him about the news in the morning paper, he glared at her with an eye which suggested he was about to hit her. For five or six minutes he raged on; carving the while, throwing the meat onto the plates, his voice resounding across the room. Nobody said anything. She found it almost impossible to eat with that savage turbulence raging round her, but the other two ate in silence: a silence which lasted until Mr. Claviger (who had drunk three or four large glasses of beer) rose and, without a word to any of them, stalked out of the room.

Then she looked at her mother- and sister-in-law, in search of explanation. Mrs. Claviger only gave her a wan little smile. 'Oh, you'll get used to him: he's often like that.'

'More often than not,' added Cassie, 'when Harold's out.'

'You must not take any notice,' her mother continued.

That was all. Jean did not know where to look. Mrs. Claviger's blanched face, permanently settled in lines of pain and apprehension, Cassie's dead sullenness, offered no opening. Neither of them said any more: they drank their coffee in silence; she went up to her own room again. Life in Claviger House, she found, was organized like a hotel. What happened in the morning she did not know: she and Harold had breakfast in their own room, made by her on their own gas stove in the little kitchen that with the bathroom and bedroom comprised their flat. Then he departed for the mill. He walked, his father went in the car, but they generally came back together to the midday meal. Then the family met, but as a rule she saw none of them before that, or again between that and six, when they reassembled for tea. After tea, she and Harold withdrew upstairs, and supper was brought up to them by Cassie on a tray about nine. She deposited it and disappeared.

Like a hotel it remained, to the end. It had shocked her when, after a week there, mainly occupied on her part in happily arranging the rooms which made her home and Harold's, she sat down to write to her father, to find that beyond a description of the house (whose aspect would make him positively ill, since he was one of those unfortunates whom ugliness hurts) she really had nothing to tell him about her new relations. If she were to write him real letters, she must get to know them.

Her first efforts were addressed to Mrs. Claviger. Easy enough to get her to talk — she had fountains of ever-flowing self-pity that there was no staying or exhausting, once they were allowed to play. No matter where a conversation started, she always brought it back to herself and

her own woes; and, real as they were, Jean had not listened to her long before she felt a sympathy for Mr. Claviger rising in her heart. Mrs. Claviger was invincibly dreary; she delighted in taking the dark and sombre view of everything. She was so sorry for herself that it was impossible to be sorry for her. Only Harold could manage that, and at Harold she looked as though she could not forgive him for not being George. George had vanished some years ago: it was the best thing he could do; but his mother, in all the time that had passed since then, still expected by every mail the letter that never came; still wept as the weekly occasion of defeated hope came round again. On Tuesday evening, Harold always had to be at home, because on that day the letter failed to come, and his mother had to be coped with. To Cassie, her indifference was patent and cruel: but to find her equally indifferent to Harold shocked Jean. Did he know it? Of course he did. More difficult to understand how he had accommodated himself to the family treatment of Cassie. But Cassie was four or five years older than he; she was the eldest; as a baby, her mother had resented her, because she was a girl, not a boy. Her father had said brutally that a wench was all right, but he couldn't think how he and the missus had ever got such an ugly one. From infancy the fact that she was ugly had been ruthlessly driven home to Cassie; from the time that she could fetch and carry she had been treated as a domestic drudge; while the boys, first George and then Harold, had been sent away to school and later to college, she had had next to no education. Her ugliness repelled Jean: it took her longer to establish any sort of personal contact with Cassie than with her mother or father. She did so, in the end, only as the result of an accident. Happening to wake very early one morning, when Harold was away in Liverpool for the night, she had come

into the sitting-room and found Cassie laying the fire. Cassie gave her no greeting as she came in; she simply went on with her work.

'Do you always do this?' Jean asked.

'Of course. Who else?' said Cassie putting a match to the fire.

'Aren't there any maids?'

Cassie looked at her, now. 'What maid would stay in this house?'

Their eyes met for an instant; a slow flush mounted on the older woman's cheek. 'Didn't Harold tell you? He ought to have done.'

'Oh, yes. He did.'

'But you didn't believe him? Well, it's true. Not when he's sober. You've only seen him sober. Oh, no, that day he was simply cross. That was nothing. He's making up to you. But you will.'

'But, Cassie, I can't have you doing this room. You've far too much already. You can never have a minute to yourself.'

Cassie was busy dusting. 'What does that matter?' she said, in a thick voice.

'Why, of course it matters. I'm sure Harold would be furious.'

'Oh, he doesn't know. Besides — he's used to it. And I'm hopeless. What should I do with time? No one wants to talk to me. There's nowhere for me to go. I can't do anything... I'm not quite there, you know. Even the children in the street say things after me when I go out. That's why I hate going into the town. They're brutal here. They say just what they think. Harold used sometimes to take me in the car. Oh, no, I couldn't come with you.' She shrank back. 'We're too different.'

Jean looked at her, baffled. The vision of Cassie's drab existence stretched out before her mind's eye, back to her childhood, on to old age. What had she to look forward to? And yet she had to go on, from day to day.

'Do I make it worse for you?' she asked.

Cassie hesitated. 'I thought you would; I hated you when Harold told us about you. I was afraid you would make him take a house of his own. He ought to have a different life: he ought not to be locked up here. But your playing — I like that.' There was actually a brightening of her dull eyes.

'Do you really? I wish you'd come in and listen — you can't hear properly from downstairs, I'm sure. Please: I mean it.'

'I'll see if I can find time,' said Cassie grudgingly.

She did not come, but one afternoon, going out into the passage, Jean found her sitting at the top of the stairs, and dragged her in. After that, she used to come with her sewing — sewing that, as often as not, lay unheeded in her lap — and sit listening. Now and then Jean would say, 'This is a favourite of Harold's,' and then Cassie would attend more ardently, with her head cocked and her eyes wide. Sometimes they talked; Jean told her about Scotland and her father, and about Germany: described her friends and discoursed on books she was reading. Cassie's interest fell off when she turned from people to books. She said little, but, from the accumulated fragments that she dropped, Jean came to discern the outlines of an existence such as she would have thought impossible in the twentieth century, but one shared, so Cassie implied, by ever so many women in Lancashire.

'It's all mills here,' Cassie said. 'Nothing else matters. I'd far sooner have gone into mill myself — but of course Father'd never hear of it — and it would look bad. Mother

was never in mill — it was a rise in the world for him when Father married her; her father kept a pub. She was reckoned to be very pretty in those days.'

It was, as Jean began to make it out, a world far more strange to her than that of Dresden or Munich had ever been. In Dresden and Munich, her fellow students spoke another language, but they used it to express thoughts she shared and ideas she understood. In Bluehills, the thoughts and ideas that made up life for her seemed to have little or no place. There might — there must — be people who cared for these things, but in these early years she did not discover them. They did not belong to the circle of persons with whom Mr. and Mrs. Claviger were on visiting terms. The men were occupied in business; their free time was spent in golf or in their motor cars. What the women did, she found it hard to make out. They looked after their houses; they went out shopping: that seemed to be all. A few of the men took part in public work; none of the women. Her father- and mother-in-law might be extreme instances: yet, broadly, they were typical. Occasionally she and Harold dined out, with his parents, at some mansion near by; more rarely, but at proper intervals, an assembly of neighbours dined back at Claviger House — how Cassie survived the latter ordeal she could not imagine. These evenings conformed to an unvarying pattern. First, there was a long heavy dinner: silent until the men, warmed with drink, became noisily anecdotal. At table, the ladies hardly spoke — Jean soon discovered that she was not expected to do so. Most of these stocky, red-faced, shrewd-eyed men seemed, like her father-in-law, to have married young, wives of inferior vitality to their own, who had not the energy to rise, as they had done, with increasing wealth. In the drawing-room, ranked with heavy furniture and encumbered with

innumerable small tables loaded with highly polished ornaments and photograph frames, an uphill period of syncopated talk, mainly on domestic difficulties, followed; then, one which she disliked even more, when the gentlemen reappeared — disliked, indeed, so much that she came to welcome bridge as a relief; for unless they did sit down to cards, it happened more often than not that some man, lifted by alcohol out of the dumb terror with which she seemed to inspire the normal Bluehillian male, attempted, heavily and clumsily, to flirt with her. Apart from such social gaieties, there was little variety for the average wife. Mr. Claviger would take Mrs. Claviger (not Cassie) on an occasional visit to Blackpool and a more occasional trip to London. Mrs. Claviger had never been out of England: Cassie hardly out of Lancashire. In this they were rather exceptional — plenty of people went further; but in their ideas of what money was for, they all seemed to her much the same. To her mind they were incompletely civilized. She could not join their existence onto anything she had known before; to imagine her father among these people was impossible. They would have thought him an amiable lunatic; what would he have thought of them? Perhaps his wide sympathies and the ripe wisdom of his patient tolerance might have discovered some point of contact beyond her power to achieve. Tolerance, she knew, was not her long suit. To her it seemed that, except with the Henshaws, conversation in Bluehills rarely touched any of the themes she had thought of before as constituting its point, and the reason why one enjoyed it. And the Henshaws were seldom in Bluehills; Sir Michael had never had any active concern in the historic mills that bore his family name, though it was that name that enabled Stephen to represent a constituency where his views were regarded by the people who mattered as no more than an

amiable foible in a man of his culture and antecedents. Stephen's own views on Bluehills, expressed on the first occasion when she met him, were no more complimentary than her own.

'The whole place wants smashing,' he said. 'Not that I can get my constituents to see it. Those that work in mills dream of owning one, and grinding a bit more than is already ground off the faces of the poor, living up here in the park, and having more than is good for them to drink. That's all. There isn't a pin to choose between the owners and the workers. Is there, Harold?'

Harold merely shrugged his shoulders.

'How he has managed to survive — that's the miracle,' said Stephen. 'Neither a red face nor a bowler hat! Reading everything, too.'

'I don't in fact read anything like as much as I did,' said Harold.

'No,' replied Stephen. 'That's the worst of married life — the one chance for you was to be unhappy — and here's Mrs. Claviger saving you even from that...'

Harold smiled.

'I hear you're trying to get a *crèche* started,' said Stephen, turning to Jean. 'There you have Bluehills in one — a town where half the married women have to go to work and leave their babies, and nowhere for them to leave them. It's barbarous.'

'And she's busy with a music society, too,' added Harold.

Both those things did get started — though the music society died after a brief and difficult existence, which taught Jean that she did not know the *a b c* of how to organize anything but a feud; half the kind ladies were hardly on speaking terms with her for a period, and her withdrawal seemed the only way in which to save the scheme from the ruin

brought upon its committee by her suggestion that a certain number of women weavers ought to be on it. She had an excuse for withdrawing that was not a mere cloak for cowardice: she was going to have a baby. The baby was born: she was desperately ill — too ill to know what was happening, except as part of a dream, too ill to see her child: when she came back from the threshold of death on which, unknowing, she had hovered for weeks, it was dead. In December it was born and died: spring was touching the leaves of the trees with green fingers when she entered her sitting-room for the first time that year, and looked out, leaning on Harold's supporting arm, at the familiar prospect: saw, beyond that faint green screen, the dark mass of Bluehills, the black clouds belching from its factory chimneys, heard the faint incessant hum of their machinery.

That Easter she and Harold spent at Moragh with her father. It was the last time they saw him — but of that she had had no suspicion at the time. He seemed well; his great edition of Pindar was on the point of completion; he talked eagerly of many other things he was to do. Six weeks after they left, he finished it; six months later, he died, in his sleep. Had he had any premonition of this? He was not very old — barely sixty-five: it was unlikely. If his talk had turned on death, the reason was not personal: if he had a particular thought on the subject, it had reference to their loss — hers and Harold's. Indeed, it was of that she had been speaking with him when they had the conversation that came back to her mind so often, afterwards. It was late in the afternoon, but still warm enough for her and Dr. Farquhar, well wrapped up in cloaks, to sit on the porch, looking out over the loch where Harold was fishing — his boat a speck just discernible in the distance.

'Harold was wonderful. He minded dreadfully — some-

times I think more even than I did, but always somehow for me, and through me. The doctor says I probably shan't have another — or not for a very long time. That's hard for him, and it makes me feel so pointless. Bluehills makes me feel pointless, anyhow, apart from him. He's got his work, but I don't see what I'm for.'

'Does he?' asked her father.

'See what I'm for?'

'No; what he is for.'

She hesitated. Her eyes were on the dark speck. 'No,' she replied, after a moment. 'Perhaps not. He wouldn't, anyhow, put it like that. He doesn't ask these silly questions. He just goes on. He's got an amazing gift of throwing himself into what he's doing. I put these riddles to him, sometimes, when I've been reading poetry to him — or he to me: he reads beautifully, you know — but he never seems to take much interest in them.'

'He's right,' said Dr. Farquhar. 'Point? It's not a question of that, for any of us. Here we are — let us at least have the sense to know it. Don't, my dear, try not to suffer: suffering isn't an experience to be glorified or fussed over — it's far too common: in so far as you are alive and will, physically, perish, you must know it. For what it is. Try to know all you can: wherever you are, there's the most fascinating puzzle-picture before you — before all of us — with pieces of every size, shape, and colour: new ones always turning up, old ones recurring in series; if you can see any kind of pattern that is truthful, you'll find time all too short. But for God's sake remember that you are one of the pieces; only one. Important — yes, very, to get it in its place; but not the subject of the whole show. It's not spoiled or condemned because you get chipped. And there's a place for you whether you are blue or brown, orange or mouse-

coloured. You're rather a bright-coloured bit, like your mother, but don't be dazzled by that; others are brighter still, and even their brightness depends on the dull ones being there to show them off. Never shut your eyes, but often shut your mouth. You can't be a physical coward, for she was bravery itself; but you must fight against mental cowardice — sloth — sentimentalism — because you'll get some of that, I'm afraid, from me. Oh, I've worked, yes: but not at hardest things I could have tackled. You see, I'm not really, I never have been, entitled to live off-stage as I do. I am a bad citizen, and the shameful thing is that I know it. I'd like you to be a good one. Not a philanthropist: I don't mean that — I hate that: just a citizen... Your Harold is a good citizen.'

Jean glowed. 'Yes. Very good. I'm ashamed to say I sometimes wish he wasn't quite so good — when it takes him out in the evening, and I have to play by myself. But I understand.'

'It's easier in a way, for him, because he is much less self-conscious; he never sees himself doing things. But always it may go very hard with such people. Imagination helps really more than it hinders. He might have the sort of shock you'd be inoculated against in advance. There's where you will be able to help him.'

How she was to do it Dr. Farquhar did not tell her, for Harold was coming up the path, pretending that he had had a very bad day, caught nothing, and then revealing a basket of fish of a size that beat records.

This talk, however, had made her feel that she could only become a good citizen by learning, late as it might seem to begin, how other citizens lived. She had fallen into the Bluehillian habit of disconnection. Mills were the sum and substance of life there, but she had never been inside one.

She asked Harold if she could be taken over one of the Claviger mills.

In the weaving-room she stood watching a fair-haired girl, a pretty creature in the twenties, manipulating four looms, in a manner that seemed to her inexperienced eye quite marvellous: moving swiftly between them, passing from one to the other, with deft and skilful care. At first she was lost in admiration of the grace that belongs to any action performed with easy mastery. Then the noise and heat began to dizzy her: she could hardly hear the explanations being given to her by the overlooker, and anyhow did not understand them. Her eyes wandered up and down the lines of machinery, and rested first on this girl and then on that; some of them seemed to be quite young, others well past middle age, some really old — but in Bluehills you could never tell how old a woman worker was; so much she had learned by merely looking at the people as they came streaming out of the mills when the buzzer sounded. Suddenly, there was a crash. The fair-haired girl had fainted. Jean moved forward, but the overlooker had been quicker; he had picked her up from the machine against which she had collapsed in time to save her from any serious injury from the whirring steel. There was a moment of confusion. The faint seemed to be a heavy one; the girl did not come to at once, but lay, looking like death, her delicate features refined to a waxen pallor, her fair head strengthless against the man's white overall.

'Poor Zillpah!' said another older woman, just at Jean's elbow. 'It'll be her time, I expect. The old devil!'

'Had I better take her home?' asked Jean. 'I know the car's outside. It would save her something.'

'There won't be anyone there to look after her.' Nevertheless, after a few more minutes of fuss and confusion, this

had been arranged. Zillpah, although she had recovered some measure of consciousness, was still in a dazed, semi-comatose state; she let herself be lifted into the car, and there leaned against Jean's shoulder, with her eyes closed. Throughout the brief drive she did not open them.

The car drew up at a number in a long row of low-browed, two-storied houses, flat on the cobbled street, all exactly like one another. Three or four children were playing on the pavement: a baby was yelling in a pram before the closed door of the next house, with a tiny sister, not much beyond the toddling stage, vainly trying to soothe it — the mother doubtless was in the mill. Knocking at the door produced no reply for some time: then, at last, a man's head appeared from an upper window. The lodger, on night work, came down, grumbling at having been disturbed, and let them in.

'She's stone deaf, you know' — he indicated the kitchen with his thumb. 'Besides being stuck to her chair.'

Jean could not stay to inquire what he meant, for Zillpah was again swooning and would have fallen but for her arm.

'Eh, the poor lass! But she looks badly. Shall I run for t'doctor?'

'Oh, that would be kind.'

He pulled his thin coat round him. 'I'll just get on me boots.'

Zillpah's room upstairs was a slip of a place, very little in it, but clean and tidy, and the window open. And what a pretty girl she was when her clumsy clothes were off! lovely hands, exquisite skin. It seemed a shame to put such coarse calico next it: Jean thought of her own underclothing, and felt ashamed. What being poor meant entered her mind with the sharpness of a realized fact. It grew sharper when, having made the girl as comfortable as she could, she went

downstairs again to the kitchen. The room was dark; the atmosphere of an almost unbearable stuffiness. All the upper part was occupied by clothes hanging on pulleys above the huge cavernous grate. By the fire an old woman was sitting: a strange, crumpled, gnome-like figure with a face all lines and hollows: from those hollows her eyes looked out bright with question.

'What is it?' shouted an alarmingly loud voice, the unnaturally lifted, unmodulated voice of the deaf. 'Is Zillpah taken bad?'

'She's not very well. I want to make her something.'

Evidently the old woman did not hear. Jean drew nearer and, looking very straight into her opaque eyes, repeated her remark.

'Yes, yes,' said the old woman impatiently. 'I knew how it would be... They can't stand against t'master. The kettle's nigh boiling.'

A sound rent the air. The buzzer. Soon there was a clattering of feet down the cobbled street and in another minute a young man strode into the room: a short dark-browed young man, in whose aspect there was something fierce and unyielding.

'Is something wrong with Zillpah?' he asked, addressing Jean. 'Shall I fetch the doctor?'

Jean explained that the lodger had gone. The young man's brows drew further down.

'It's that stuff: I told her not to take it... I told her it made no difference to me. But my mother kept going for her, and I suppose she couldn't stand it, poor lass. It's along of my being away. He knew that: he sent me away of purpose. Is she very bad? I'm going up to see her.'

Two children — a small girl and a still smaller boy — came in and stood staring, round-eyed. The kettle suddenly

boiled. The little girl dived into a cupboard, produced the teapot, tea, bread, and jam. Jean made tea: poured out a cup, and went up with it in her hand.

The young man was standing by the bed holding one of Zillpah's hands, and looking down at her with an expression which altered his face out of recognition. She was clinging to him, and talking now, wildly.

'Jimmy, Jimmy, forgive me... I couldn't help it. I can't bear it... I couldn't lose my job. Mother and the little ones'd have clemmed...'

'Don't worry, dearie. That's over and done with. You've got to be brave now. Listen: I'm going to marry you. Yes: mother'll have to see it now, and if she won't, then that's all there is to it. You need me more than she does. And I need you. And I'll love the little 'un like my own. Yes, I will. Honest. Yes, even if you can't have no more. Don't cry, dearie, no, no, don't.'

He knelt down by the bed and took her, sobbing, in his arms.

Jean laid the tea on the chair and slipped downstairs. In the kitchen the old woman sat as before: the two children were quietly eating at the table. She felt helpless and useless: there must be things to do, but she did not know what they were. The complete lack of the appliances she was used to baffled her. The little boy seemed to realize her embarrassment. He looked up.

'It'll be all right, now Jimmy's come,' he said. 'He'll look after things.'

A noise at the door, voices: the doctor.

'Why, Mrs. Claviger!' he cried — Jean had met him at dinner. 'You here? Girl taken ill at the mill — family way, I suppose? Oh, yes, there's lots of that here. I'll go up and have a look. Keep the kettle boiling — one has to make do

with what one finds — you don't know your Bluehills well yet, I see.'

With a cheery laugh he vanished upstairs. Jean, standing in the little lobby, looked about her. No doubt there were hundreds, nay, thousands, of homes in Bluehills like this. You stepped straight in from the damp black street: on the right a room, generally an unused parlour: here, no doubt, where the old woman slept, and, possibly, since there was a lodger, the children too: behind, the kitchen, where everybody lived, scullery, washhouse: above, two bedrooms. The atmosphere was at once cold and frowsty: cold because on the street level; frowsty because the windows were shut to keep out the damp air. This house was clean. Who kept it clean? It must be Zillpah, though she worked in the mills, and doubtless her wages were the sole support both of the children and of that old deaf woman in the kitchen: could she be her mother? And when she came home there must be the housework awaiting her. No wonder they looked driven, the women she saw hurrying along when the buzzer sounded.

She was still staring at a framed certificate of merit awarded to Zillpah Leach for proficiency in English, French, history, geography, and general conduct, and feeling that the reality of Bluehills was only now being disclosed to her, when steps coming down the stairs roused her. She looked up and saw the dark young man. His face was distorted by pain: pain and anger. He cared for this girl as Harold did for her. He felt as Harold had done last year. No — as the meaning of all she had heard came home to her, much worse. For he was angry, too: justly angry. She would not have been surprised if he had broken out in attack upon her. But he did not: he only looked at her vaguely, his eyes dark with distress.

'Can I do anything?' she asked.

His face softened; suddenly she saw that it was a good face, the eyes candid, the mouth kindly.

'If you can make her realize that I'm going to marry her as soon as she's well again... She'll say no: and talk about my mother. But I'm going to tell my mother straight. What I'm frightened about is that she may try to do away with herself... Really I am.' He was: his eyes showed that.

'But, if she's fond of you...'

'Ah, but that'd be why. She's a good girl, Zillpah is — good: you've no idea. And mother's thrown it up against her... As if it were her fault! Mother has the old ideas you see. And she doesn't understand. But you look as if you might. You don't belong here, do you?'

'Oh, yes, I do. I'm Mrs. Claviger: Mrs. Harold Claviger.'

At Harold's name something queer happened to his face: it seemed to clear and soften, instantly.

'Oh, him,' he said. 'You're Mr. Harold's wife? That's all right, then. You will look after Zillpah.' It was not a question — a statement.

That night at tea storms raged. Mr. Claviger came in, his face black with rage. For the first time she felt his tongue directed against herself: her taking the car, its not being there when he wanted to come home at dinner: her taking his car down to Queen Mary Street, with a workgirl in it — she did not know which of her crimes were the worst, and all were heinous. She did not much mind what he said — for what he said was ludicrous. But the physical effect upon her of his voice, of his eyes, of the threatening approach of his whole enormous person as if he were going to lay his hands upon her, was horrible: for she was afraid. Her mind might resist: her nerves jangled in obedience to his detonating voice as though she were a helpless piano. She realized with sickening clarity what had made Cassie what she was,

and what bodily fear — that idea one dismisses so lightly — really feels like. Then Harold came in: his voice, cold and clear, with the authority behind it of unshakable self-control, cut across his father's: stopped him in mid-course. Instantly, a rift of calm opened in the raging tempest. On top of her childish gratitude was wonder. Harold's difference had never been so miraculous. Years of this, a childhood horribly overshadowed by it, had not touched him: something incorruptible in him had shaken it off.

'Hold on, Father. You don't speak to Jean in that tone. She did quite right — the girl was ill: she had to look after her.'

There, for the moment, it ended. Only for a moment. Two evenings later, it broke out again. This time Harold attacked.

'Is it the case, Father, that you have sacked Dalton?'

'It is.'

'Why?'

'That's no business of yours. But if you want to know, you may. Not content with being damnably insolent to me, he says he means to marry that girl Zillpah Leach, and give his name to her brat.'

'Yes? I don't see how that concerns the works. Dalton is a first-rate worker. I propose to take him on in my department. I let you know just for convenience, now.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind.'

Harold made no reply. But Mr. Claviger needed none, nor did Jean.

'It's a bit of a risk,' Harold said to her later, with a grin. 'He'd fire me too, if he could. And he knows he has a weapon against me — he knows I've sacrificed a lot — including you — to keeping my mother and Cassie under the same roof with me, and he could blow me sky-high as far as that goes

any day by dismissing me. He's quite free to. He's mad, I've never seen him so mad. It's far worse when he's silent — there's the most awful tussle going on between his madness and his business instincts. But business instincts will win. They always do. He sees me going to Etherington's... Besides, sooner or later, he'll see that I'm saving him. Dalton's a dangerous fellow. If he victimized him, he'd have the Union right on top of him.'

'Is that why you've taken him on?' Jean smiled up into his face: she was on her favourite stool by the fire, at his feet.

'Business instinct coming out in me? Honestly, I didn't think of that till quite late — though he did, early. Dalton's a queer lad — but there's stuff in him. I've seen men broken and embittered — men like him, full of fire and grit — and it's the most sickening sight. I can't stand for it.'

'What a world... That poor girl...'

'Yes. You understand how it all started.' On this they merely looked at each other. 'Dalton can't really afford to marry her: he's got a mother to keep, she has her mother and those two kids — her brother and sister. I don't know how he's going to do it, even if Zillpah goes back to work. It's no wonder he's a firebrand. All the same, we should all have been blown to kingdom come the other night, if it hadn't been for him.'

'What happened?' asked Jean — this was the first she had heard of it.

'Oh, nothing much. One of the condensers blew up. Horrid mess, for a bit.'

She shuddered: then smiled to herself. Harold had probably been wonderful — he always was when there was what he called 'something to be done,' but she would have to get somebody else to tell her about that. His silence, now, suggested both that there had been real danger and that despite

his reiterated 'Dalton was splendid,' he had been the central actor in the affair. She must ask Jimmy Dalton about it.

'Going over that mill gave me quite a shock, you know,' she said, since he refused to elaborate. 'I had no idea... It's rather awful to think that our lives are built on that.'

'There are very bad sides to it. Sometimes I confess I wish we could get away, for my own sake and even more for yours. But it would be there still, if we did. And there's my mother. You probably don't realize it, but your being here makes a big difference to her. Stephen has always thought me an awful ass. He was on it again the other day. He wants me to break through — cut out the whole thing, go to London. You'd like that?'

Often she had thought of saying some of this to him: saying how difficult it was and how wasteful, living in Bluehills: wasteful of her, still more wasteful of him. He, all day at the factory; she, occupied in activities that seemed largely futile: making music for nobody to hear, trying to lift by an inch a mountain that darkened the sun. But now, when he put it into words, there seemed to be nothing in it. The fact that he saw it took its sting away. She turned and looked into his face; in his eyes there was an expression that moved her through and through — more deeply even than the ecstatic light of passion that at times lit them; she could not speak; she only leaned her head against his knees.

'Nearly four years,' he murmured.

'And it's better than ever, isn't it?'

'Stephen,' he said, after a moment, 'was mocking at marriage. You know how he goes on: he's fearfully clever: I can't answer him. But... he doesn't know. I couldn't tell him.'

'No,' she said softly. 'No. It's the real Story without an End.'

CHAPTER III

DUSK was gathering in the streets when Roberta reëntered the flat. The passage, always dark, was black; the studio, when she opened the door, chilly and grey. Her first impression was that it was empty. In the square of the window, facing her, the glories of the fading sunset were still reflected, opalescent; that brightness made the room more obscure; it was not till after a peering moment that she discerned Jean lying on the sofa, her face turned towards the window: lying so still that she might have been asleep.

She was not asleep, however; her eyes shone green as a cat's in the dim light.

'You startled me, Berta. I had forgotten where I was. How cold it feels! May I put a light to the fire?'

She was off the sofa as she spoke, and busy moving first the lacquer screen and then the bronze pot of honesty away from the fireplace. 'I dare say we shall put it all back to-morrow: it only gets cold when the sun goes, but now it feels almost frosty.' She put a match to the paper as she spoke. 'That's going to do all right — whatever else I can't do, I can lay a fire. Isn't it lovely?'

She knelt on the hearthrug, her hands busy adjusting a faggot here, a piece of coal there. The ruddy glow played over her face, about the room; it lit up the roses on the table and suddenly caught the drawings on the wall. Jean had her back to them now, but Roberta saw them distinctly. Small resemblance between the one of Harold there, and the one she had made to-day. Had he changed as

much as that? That was a boy's face, on the wall; rather a tiresome boy, complacent, limited, too cheerful. No one could accuse the man in Court of looking too cheerful. This morning, when she got there, Mr. Hughes's clerk had become quite confidential. She could not try to prevent his talking, since it was entirely due to him that she finally got an excellent seat; and after all, perhaps, it was a good preparation for the trial itself to meet his purely professional attitude to the case early on: the brutality with which the dead man was referred to as 'Henshaw' and the living as 'Claviger,' in Court, would have struck her more painfully if he had not already familiarized her with it.

'Mr. Hughes can't make Claviger out,' he observed. 'He's been to see him, of course, but came back no wiser than he went. And if he can't get anything out of a client, no one alive can. It's a hard case, for old Claviger's no good, either; not that he doesn't talk — he talks by the hour, lives on our stairs; but Mr. Hughes is always busy when he comes. He's awfully down on her, too — the old man, I mean. Not that Mr. Hughes likes her either. Oh, not because of her carryings-on: he's seen too much of that. No, in herself. She's clever, I suppose: he never does like clever women. I do — but then I've never seen her. I feel sorry for her myself. My daughter's husband is in Mespot. It's jolly hard on her, I can tell you. Yes. She's very pretty; and working now in one of the Ministries. And, after all, they'd only been married six weeks when he went off and enlisted. Yes, I'm on the woman's side, every time.'

'You'd be on Mrs. Claviger's, I'm sure, if you knew her,' said Roberta, feeling a sudden warmth towards the little red-faced man, with his squeaky Cockney voice.

'Hm, hm... But that's no good, you see, for Mr. Eden; that don't help his case. No; if he's to get Claviger off —

and there's not many at the Bar could do it, mind you — Mrs. will have to go on the muck-heap. You won't like his line, I dare say, but he's a rare one with juries.'

The fire was now well under way. Jean rose from her knees. 'That's all right now. I'll be getting supper ready; it won't take long. There's a pie to heat in the oven: by the time I've laid the table, you'll be ready? No, no, I'll do that: you must be tired; go and have a bath.'

Emerging refreshed, Roberta found that Jean had been as good as her word. Within half an hour they were sitting at table, in the pool of golden light made by two tall candles (Jean had a passion for candles) which brought out the scent and colour of the yellow roses expanding in the warm glow of the fire. Beyond the table, the studio was in semi-darkness; with the curtains drawn, and a smoking meal before them, the scene was delightfully snug. If only she had not got to tell Jean about the Old Bailey. She had brought an armful of evening papers in with her, but they lay on the chair, just as she had left them; Jean had not so much as turned them over.

When she spoke it was not about the trial.

'Berta,' she remarked suddenly, 'are you happy?'

The question, surprising as it was, was evidently seriously meant; it joined on to something, though she could not imagine to what.

'Happy? I'm not sure that I know what it is. Perhaps it isn't — I mean perhaps there isn't such a state.'

'Oh, yes, there is.'

'Well, if so I don't think I know anything about it: I expect it's pretty rare. Compared with now, it seems that I was happy before... all this. I was all right: I had my work and my studio and my friends: life seemed interesting, there were things going on. I got low at times; who doesn't? But

on the whole, looking back on it now, I think I was happy. I suppose that, then, I shouldn't have admitted it.'

'No,' Jean interrupted, 'I'm sure you wouldn't. I *was* happy, but you used to make me feel as though that were rather a poor, dull sort of state; Bluehillian. You did, didn't you?'

'Perhaps I did — yes,' with an unwilling smile, 'I did.'

'Good. Good for you, I mean: honesty one hundred per cent.' Then, after a moment's pause, 'How did Harold look?'

It was not only the pause that gave the question the effect of suddenness. Had she mentioned Harold before, since she had been living in the studio? Roberta could not remember that she had; certainly she had not done so in the last few days: not, so she thought, since that day on which she had been to see him in prison. Now, by way of easiest answer to the question, she got up, found her portfolio, and extracted a pencil drawing from its depths.

'There. He sat like that the whole time; I don't think he moved at all, not even his eyes. It was the queerest effect, as though, for him, no one else was there.'

Jean looked up from her contemplation of the drawing with an expression that she could not fathom. It made Roberta want to get away from Harold.

'Even when Eden was cross-examining your friend Esther — he reduced her to tears, by the by: it was the star turn of the day, and horribly painful — he didn't seem to take any notice.'

Jean did not seem to have heard. Her eyes were on the drawing again.

'Where does he sit?' she said, without looking up. 'I've never been in the Old Bailey.'

'In a little sort of rather high box opposite the judge, with

warders below on either side of him; they bring him in and take him out. The Court was absolutely packed. There were more women than men there; and dressed up to the nines most of them, as if it were a theatre; they fought to get in in the most horrible way... I never saw such a sight. I should never have got a place but for Hughes's clerk; he was on the lookout for me and ever so friendly. He's on your side.'

Jean looked up, on this, with a peculiar expression. 'Yes? What side is that?'

It was just what Roberta could not say, so she prevaricated: 'I mean — he likes you.'

Jean smiled. 'Better than Hughes? That doesn't say much.'

'Eden was brilliant, though. At first I couldn't see what he was driving at — but it all came out in the end... I mean, in his cross-examination of Esther.'

This time Jean was listening: Roberta, on a flash, realized what Eden had been at — and wished she had not referred to Esther; but she was bound to have done so: it was in all the papers.

'How did Esther come in? Was she a Crown witness?'

'Yes, actually she was — but it was Eden who got everything out of her. The Crown only called her to fix the time — by her telephone call, and Harold's having spoken to her on the day... as a friend of yours, not of Stephen's. It was Eden who brought that out. He's not going to leave anybody with much character by the time he's finished.'

'I see.' Jean grinned. She did see — why was she so horribly quick? 'Carrying on with pacifist while gallant husband's in the trenches—two birds with one stone, eh? Clever Eden!'

'I loathe him.'

'On my account?'

Roberta plunged. 'Of course, I don't know what you really felt about Stephen...'

It was of no use. Jean only said, 'No,' and she could not hear in that 'No 'any trace of the interrogative inflection that would have permitted her to go on. Curious, how she imposed silence, frank as she was: most curious at a moment when, apparently, every intimacy of her life was being exposed to the millions who were and had now for many days been gloating over the 'Claviger case.' They thought they knew everything. Yet beyond the facts which were common property — that Harold Claviger, coming home unexpectedly from France, had found his wife in the arms of his old friend Stephen Henshaw, the pacifist M.P., and shot the said Stephen Henshaw dead — she, Jean's most intimate friend, knew nothing. Eden's defence was first that there had been a struggle, then that Stephen had been Jean's lover. The people in Court to-day, the people reading the evening papers this evening, took that second assumption for granted; that made the case what was called a 'human drama.' By some wondrous process of sentimentalization, they felt that it at once entitled Harold to shoot and made Jean interesting, even an object of envy. 'It's only human, that's what I feel,' she had heard a woman say behind her in Court this morning. 'He's away, months on end: how is she to stand it? Do you imagine *he* didn't find some sort of consolation? They mostly do. I don't blame them. And I shouldn't blame her, either, if only that Henshaw had been a decent fellow. But one of those pacifists — no, that's a bit thick.' Yes — that was Eden's case. Was it true? Had Stephen and Jean been lovers? Roberta did not know. On the whole, she believed that Jean had been in love with him: she knew that he had been in love

with her. If that was so, did not the rest follow? That was just what, with Jean, she could not say. Intellectually, of course, she was modern, thoroughly modern; but there were streaks in her of something very different, and those streaks were made, Roberta suspected, of very tough material. Harold was not modern at all — and Harold was the person whom she had chosen to marry...

'You're not telling me much about it, Berta.'

Roberta, with a cowardice of which she was ashamed, held out 'The Star.'

'No — I can't read the papers. It's your job — it's what you went for. Go ahead. Don't try to spare my feelings, or any nonsense of that sort. My feelings were never fine, and I haven't got any left. And never mind that I know it all; I want to hear.'

'The difficulty is that there is little to tell. McClure, who opened for the Crown, is exactly the layman's idea of the perfect lawyer — if I ever want to put one into a drawing I've got my model.'

'More so than Eden?'

'Eden may be the reality; but I assure you McClure is the idea. He's got a white, dry face with a faint twitch of purely intellectual humour about the eyebrows: a dry voice with no emotional notes in it. Of course there was some formal stuff first; Eden said the prisoner pleaded "Not guilty"—then the jury was sworn and so on. Then McClure opened, just as if he were dealing with some perfectly ordinary police court case, by telling us to clear out of mind the "special and adventitious circumstances surrounding this crime. In the eye of the law they are irrelevant, and it is to administer the law, which is above time and place, that we are here. The law is crystal clear. In our country life is sacred. That is an absolute rule." Then he had a very im-

pressive passage about this being the indispensable basis of civilized life. Let me have the paper: I want to get it right... Yes, here it is: "On no other terms can it go on. Unless human life is sacred, society breaks down, sinks back into barbarism. That is simple. It is also fundamental. All our other more elaborate prescriptions derive from that, imply that. Let that go and the rest goes with it. Thou shalt do no murder: thou shalt not wilfully take thy brother's life. It makes no difference whose life it is, whether the greatest or the meanest, the most valuable or the most worthless of His Majesty's subjects — all are sacred. The law says a man shall not violently deprive another of life. Life may not be taken. To do that is a crime, always and everywhere. To take it in self-defence is the crime of manslaughter. To take it not in self-defence is the crime of murder. In either case, it is no defence to say that the actor is a good man, his victim a bad. Nor do circumstances affect it: not even the circumstances of war. It is no defence to say that we are at war."' She looked up from the paper. 'He went on like that for a bit, and somehow — and this is what I can't give you — it was terribly impressive. Not like a professor lecturing to a class, but like some remote tragic prophet who is compelled to state ultimate truths he is reading from the stars.'

'Like Sir Michael Henshaw: yes, I see.'

'He gave me a sense of being lifted into immutable verities, of the air being rarefied and clarified. Ah, here's another bit: "It is not in excitement, however legitimate, or in sympathy, however natural, that you must apply your minds to the question, which is a pure question of fact, did or did not Harold Claviger, the prisoner in the dock, murder Stephen Henshaw? It is with murder he is being charged and against the charge of murder defended!" He went on to

say that in a long professional life it had often fallen to his lot to be the instrument charged with the duty of proving that society's first and most basic law had been infringed. He was glad to say that he had never done so without complete conviction and a clear conscience; but there had been cases when the proof had been difficult, the facts hard to establish. Not so here. Never in his experience had a case been so clear, the facts so indisputable, so self-explanatory, so lucid, so coherent as here. Generally there was some step about which one had to say, "This must have happened." But here one could say, at every stage, and show, at every stage, this *did* happen. Then he pointed out how it was right, it was part of the law of which we were so proud, that every accused person, no matter what the facts, should be presumed innocent until he was proved guilty: right that he should have the advantage of learned counsel to defend him; right that he should be tried not by legal standards only but by those standards as interpreted by the common sense and human experience of his peers.'

'Good. You talk just like him.'

'And so on. In this case there was no possibility of interpreting the facts otherwise than as wilful murder. When he got to that, he made a pause: there was an extraordinary silence in Court, it was as though everybody was not only sitting still, but holding his breath. No one coughed: there was not a rustle. I looked at Harold: I suppose everyone did; but he gave no sign — he looked stony.'

Jean had the drawing in her hand again. She did not look up.

'McClure went on to say that the essential facts were not disputed. He then proceeded to give an outline of them. But I needn't tell you that?'

'Oh, yes.' Jean was inexorable. 'I want it.'

'Well, he simply recorded, very baldly, how in November, 1910, you and Harold were married and went to live in Bluehills: the Henshaws having a house not far off: Stephen being a college friend of Harold's. In 1914, Harold enlists: disagreement of views: Stephen's views irrelevant: jury could think what they liked of them — pretty evident what McClure did; but they must realize that his views did not justify murder. See opening passages of speech: 1915–1917 — nothing particular: you nursing, in Bluehills. January, 1917, Harold home on second leave; spent in London. He goes back to the front: you throw up nursing, stay in London with Mrs. Exton; see more of Stephen — old friend, nothing in it? Perhaps, perhaps not; neither here nor there. On September 2d, you having tea with him; Harold, returning unexpectedly, finds out from Mrs. Exton where you are, appears in flat, rushes past Chinese servant, bursts into room, finds you there: shoots: Stephen dies on spot. Harold stays to be arrested: says nothing; ever since says nothing; there is nothing to say. "That is my case."'

She paused. The candles were growing dangerously low and guttering. Jean got up from the table and moved to turn on the electric light. No doubt it was the strong, sudden glare that made her face appear so chalky pale, and gave such startling definition to its features, accentuated as they were by the heavy shadows under the deep-set eyes; but as she looked at her, Roberta felt how little she fitted the part Eden, according to the solicitor's clerk, was going to cast her for — the heart-broken war wife, seduced, almost against her will, to her own and her husband's undoing. As it was, every romantic resource in his bag of tricks was going to be needed if he were to get the jury to see that figure in bronze in the dock as the victim of ungovernable passion; he could not hope to pull that off unless he projected, as com-

panion figure, a Jean drawn entirely from his imagination. Of course he did not want her in Court. So little did her aspect, now, fit into any popular conception of 'heart drama' that Roberta suddenly felt her own curiosity as to what she might have felt, or be feeling, about Stephen hopelessly inadequate. Jean, now, might stand for an avenging fury, one of the Erinnyes who blew the savage claims of conscience in the ears of a world desiring only to be comfortable; she would make a good war poster — of the early 1914 type; but as the cover for a love story, no, for that she was entirely out of scale. Definitely, she was now a woman, not a girl. It was not that she looked old: her tall slightness, all bone and nerve, suggested a physique as buoyant as that of the tireless walker of the old Edinburgh days: but the eager inexperience, the vitality, untutored and unharnessed and a trifle headstrong, which had been hers, surely, until a few years ago — that was quite gone. Then, she had looked like a person who wanted to know, taste, experiment: whose courage and whose curiosity went hand in hand. Now, she looked like someone who knew: who knew too much. Roberta felt a movement of anger. The going of her own youth did not afflict her. She was, anyhow, five years older than Jean. But the vanishing of Jean's youth was almost a personal deprivation: there had been something so gay, challenging, and joyous about it, something only fully recognized now that it was gone. She had stayed in the studio when Harold was in training on Salisbury Plain — and then had struck Roberta as specially vivid and brave: she had even for the time being blown away the gloom which the first months of the war had created in her friend. Refusing absolutely to look at it like that, refusing to be apprehensive about Harold, she had, for the moment, given her a feeling that here, after all, was a big and splendid opportunity, if

only one did not let go of one's faith and one's courage. What she had then been calling to herself the 'nonsense about crusades' had, suddenly, looked different in contact with so authentic a crusader, with the true scarlet cross on white mantle: with someone who was giving with a sort of solemn joy, someone capable of rising to the heights and depths of a great experience. Then the crusader, now the Erinnys. What had bridged the gulf? The Erinnys would not do for the Old Bailey. Eden was right, there.

'Hullo!' Jean was holding up a hand. 'Listen... yes, it's another.'

It was: ominous rumbles began to shake the sky, followed within a few seconds by flashes so bright that they seemed to penetrate through the tissue of the thick curtains, and by a barrage more sustained and rackety than that of the previous night. Conversation, save of the intermittent, ejaculatory sort, was impossible. Jean moved about, clearing the table: the hands that held the piles of dishes did not tremble even when the whole building seemed to rock under the detonation of the guns. She merely said: 'It's nearer than last night.'

'Do you ever think we may be hit?'

'No. You might. Not me. I hope you won't. I couldn't do without you.'

She said this over her shoulder, as she left the room. Roberta was extraordinarily moved. Jean was not demonstrative: she hardly ever kissed her; in the whole course of a friendship extending now over more than ten years, she had hardly before said anything of this sort. Roberta had imagined that while she gave Jean the affection she might have given to sisters (had her sisters been of the kind to permit it, which they very decidedly were not) and further felt for her that excited interest roused by a young and vivid creature

whose experiences retained the sharpness and colour faded from her own, Jean's feeling for her was mainly grounded in habit: in the fact that since her father's death there was no one who went back so far, who covered so much shared experience. She had known Dr. Farquhar and had stayed at Moragh. She had been in Jean's life before Harold came into it. A warm glow filled her. The noise of the guns receded for an instant, then it came back, worse than ever, and she could not bear to be alone. Jean was washing up: she could hear her in the pantry. She followed her thither: it was not so bad when one was not by one's self.

At last it died away: the 'All Clear' sounded. In the studio Jean was standing by the table, looking at her drawings — Harold, Mr. McClure, the Judge, Mr. Eden. She had them spread out before her: her expression gave no indication that one interested her more than another.

'Well,' she said after a moment, 'are you going on with your narrative?'

Roberta on her knees before the fire, turned so as to assume a comfortable sitting position on the fender-stool.

'I will if you like — but it seems absurd. You know it all.'

'Yes. I know. But I don't understand. Something that you say may help me to the key: wake me up: make me feel something or other. I don't, as it is. I ought to, but I don't. Nothing. What did you feel when you were sitting there in Court?'

She hesitated for an instant. 'Just frightened, I think. I don't know what of. After all — there it is, isn't it?'

Jean left this. 'I suppose McClure called witnesses?'

'Yes. First the Chinaman: Lo Sing. He made a funny impression: you could feel it the moment he got in the box: his appearance, those odd eyes of his, his queer, rather sinis-

ter way of speaking — they built up a picture...' She hesitated, again.

'Of Stephen?'

'Yes.'

Jean nodded. 'I always told him it was unwise. With his opinions he ought to have had a wry-faced dumpling of a middle-aged Englishwoman. But of course queerness was just what he liked. It amused him. He enjoyed an atmosphere of plots, mystery. There was nothing in it. I was taken in at first: but really there was nothing. The utter incompetence of that Committee: you've no idea! They *felt* dangerous: actually a set of infants-in-arms. What had Lo Sing to say?'

'Oh, nothing. Only yes and no. He had let you in that afternoon? Yes. Often before? Yes. You always stayed a long time? Yes. Sometimes to dinner? No. Came in after dinner? Perhaps: if so he didn't know what time you went away. It might be late? Oh, yes, it might: he didn't know: behind his baize door he heard little. Anyhow he was studying and didn't listen. Did other ladies come? Some. Mrs. Exton? Yes. Formerly often; recently seldom. Then about the afternoon of the crime. He had let you in about four and brought tea. Heard nothing till about twenty minutes past six. Then telephone rang; lady wanted to know were you there, could she speak to you. Was just asking her name when front doorbell rang; went to the door: officer in khaki. The prisoner in the dock? Yes. Had never seen him before: did not then know his name. Had not shown him in, because prisoner pushed past him and had entered the sitting-room before Lo Sing could do anything. Went back to telephone, but found it had been cut off: stood for a moment waggling receiver, but nothing happened. Suddenly heard shot and a shriek. All this happened within

one-two seconds, he thought. Rushed in: his master lying across sofa, half on it, half on the ground: you close to him: prisoner standing, smoking pistol in hand. You said fetch doctor: had rushed downstairs to fetch Dr. Carson from flat below. Brought him up, prisoner still there, as if he had not moved.

'Then Eden got up to cross-examine Lo Sing. Was he sure about the time? Could it not have been longer than two minutes while he was busy with telephone? Yes: it might have been three, even four. Then as to noises during those minutes. He got out of him that the telephone was so placed that he could not hear anything going on in the room — not any ordinary noise.'

'I see. This is the "struggle" being prepared for, eh?'

'Yes. Eden was very clever with Lo Sing — he built up an impression that the case wasn't as simple as it looked. McClure's reëxamination didn't alter this. Then Dr. Carson. I can't say I followed, there: there was an immense lot of it — about powder blackening and so on. Then Mrs. Exton... Has Claude Exton been killed, Jean?'

'Perhaps. I don't know. All these lists every day: I haven't looked at them for weeks. Why? Was she in mourning?'

'Rather — the most fascinating get-up, with white tulle, like a nun, all swathed round her face and neck.'

'I believe one of the big French houses makes a special war-widow's outfit: Esther would be sure to get it. She looked lovely? Sensation in Court?'

'Rather. It made me feel quite sick. I loathed her.'

'Poor Berta! You thought it might have been me, and then how simple everything would have been: none of this horrid mess! Yes, I can see Esther enjoying herself: she always wants the limelight.'

'Well, she's got it. Her picture is in all the papers.'

'But you didn't draw her?'

'No. I hated her too much. Besides, there's nothing to draw in her.'

'What had she got to say?'

'Oh, a lot. You had been staying with her; you were old friends; yes, she knew the prisoner too, he was a friend of her husband's; and Stephen Henshaw — no, he was not a friend of her husband's: her husband disliked him: after 1914 refused to have him in the house. As a Crown witness she didn't seem to me to be much use — except to fix the time — there was an awful lot about that. Then Eden cross-examined. Ever so considerate and gentle. Why did Claude take that view? Was it Henshaw's opinions? Partly. Not wholly? No, not wholly. He was dreadfully clever with her over this, leading her on stage by stage, building up a picture of Stephen as the sort of man who seduced wives while their husbands were at the front. I can't tell you how he did it; it never got put in so many words: but there it was. Finally, she burst into tears and I'm sure the jury made up their minds that Stephen had been her lover and now that Claude was killed she was tortured with self-reproach. But it was after that that the real sensation came. Eden let her recover and then went on cross-examining. I must say he was marvellous. Horrible, but brilliant.'

'Yes? Tell me about it.'

She saw it, vivid before her: heard the voices. Esther's, often faint, a broken whisper, yet audible in the dead silence of the Court: Eden's, low, gentle, silky, yet penetratingly clear: a tone that went in like a fine surgical instrument. Surgeons, she believed, wore gloves for the finest, most delicate operations — so did Eden for this, but they did not hinder his fingers from probing to the depths of the wound.

And as he probed, another figure had emerged, more significant than Esther's — that of Jean... No: she could not describe it. She looked about her for the evening paper, and, finally unearthing it, turned to the centre page, where she felt sure she should find what she wanted. Yes: there it was, set out in question and answer. 'I'll just read you this — I'll skip the part where the Judge pulled him up — I didn't understand it, anyhow. And Eden got away with it in the end.' She read it out rapidly in a dry, inexpressive voice:

Before Mrs. Claviger came to stay with you, your relations with Mr. Henshaw had changed?

Yes.

May I put it that you were friends, but not lovers?

Yes.

Was that your doing?

No.

Did you believe that he had transferred his affections to someone else?

Yes.

What made you think that?

Oh, many things.

He was that sort of man?

Yes.

He had had other affairs before that with you and might have... others, after? I see. Who was it in this case?

No reply.

Was it Mrs. Claviger?

I thought so [very low].

Nevertheless you invited her to share your home. Why did you do that? She was staying with you, was she not, throughout the spring of this year, from the time of her husband's return to the front in the early days of 1917 to his return to England in September?

Yes. She was a friend of mine.

So you wanted to protect her? Is that what you suggest to the Court?

Yes.

'Did you know that?' Roberta asked.

'No,' the other replied. 'Though I might have guessed. It's Esther all over... And Harold always attracted her.' She laughed. 'Go on.'

Roberta resumed her reading.

You thought Henshaw dangerous? Dangerous to her?
Yes.
He was in love with her: was she with him?
Not then.
But later?
I thought so.
You thought, in fact, that they had become lovers?
Yes.
When did you come to think that?
Oh, I can't remember exactly. In the spring, sometime.
Did you write to Captain Claviger about it to warn him?
Yes.

Jean suddenly gave a short laugh. It was the first sign of life she had given, and it made Roberta look up from her reading.

Under your own name?
No. Not at first.
I see. At first you wrote anonymously. But later, over your own name?
Yes.
You became increasingly worried. Why?
They were seeing a great deal of each other.
And, knowing Henshaw's character, you did not like it? As a friend of both you felt you ought to protect them? So you wrote. Did Captain Claviger reply?
No.
But you went on writing?
Yes.
Did you urge him to come home?
I suggested that if he could it would be well. I did not know how far it was going. But she was under his influence.
Then, when he came, you telephoned to warn her?
Yes. I was frightened.

Frightened? Of a scene between them?'

Yes.

Was your apprehension on Henshaw's account or Claviger's?

Stephen had a very violent temper.

I see. Did you also know that he had a sword-stick with which he was very expert?

Yes.

Which he kept in his rooms?

Yes.

Jean got up from her seat and walked once or twice up and down the room. She was more stirred than Roberta had seen her: indeed, it was the first time she had shown any kind of emotion during her narrative. Her hands were clenched, her brows drawn down; her breath came hard between her nostrils. Roberta waited: she thought, hoped she was going to speak. But though she opened her lips as if about to do so, the words did not come. She sat down again finally with nothing more articulate than a groan. Roberta looked at her, painfully perplexed. Why was she so upset? Had she not known this? She must know far more than this.

'Well?' said Jean.

She pulled herself together. 'As a matter of fact there was not much more. McClure reëxamined Mrs. Exton and then Eden made a rather dry statement. I'm afraid I didn't listen very intelligently: I was so tired by then. The main points were that Harold had, as it were, caught Stephen in the act of betraying him — that there had been a struggle between them in which the sword-stick came in; and that anyhow Stephen was better dead. Of course he didn't say so, but that's what it meant.'

'Hm, hm. So that was all, for to-day?' She nodded. 'Did any of it sound to you real?'

'No. That was the queerest thing. None of it did. Even to me. It was like a picture with no life, no atmosphere; a

photograph. All accurate and yet all false. I don't mean false in detail — everything that was described was accurate enough: the facts about you and Harold and Stephen, and the careful fitting in of time and place, the description of the room and the doctor's evidence; and yet it seemed to get further and further away, the more they described it. It seemed in a way quite natural that Harold should sit there the whole time, without moving or speaking or changing his face, just listening as though it were a story about someone else, not him. I never really felt it had anything to do with him or you: one had somehow got shifted into another dimension. I have been puzzling over that ever since I came away, the whole time I have been talking to you — because in describing it, and especially of course in describing it to you, this unreality kept coming back and hitting me. And I think I've got the answer.'

She paused. Jean, sitting on the hearthrug now, close to the fire, was poking it, breaking up the central knot of coal that had been obstinately refusing to do more than emit a small funnel of white smoke. At last she got a shrewd stroke planted in the vital spot: a cleft opened right in the centre of the black mass and the flames came leaping through in long tongues of vermilion and orange, and, right at the back, a queer purple blue, too. The sudden light played over her face.

'Yes? And what is the answer?'

Roberta leaned forward. 'McClure's whole case from his opening speech, right through his examination of his witnesses, is staged outside the war: stated as if there were no war. As soon as one remembers, his speech is nonsense. Sacredness of life! Now! Right through, then and later, he built up a picture that belonged to 1913. Esther, in her dreadful ridiculous weeds, smashed his picture to pieces:

suddenly the real world came back. You see, his whole point is that the war has nothing to do with it, is not there. Whereas, of course, it has everything to do with it, everything.'

Jean dropped the poker with a clatter.

'Berta — do you know what you are saying?'

'Surely it's obvious? Eden, I'm sure, is going to rub it in.'

'Oh, yes, I dare say. But there's so much more in it than that. It's too awful. That one can be in a thing, right in it, steeped in it, subdued to it, living, breathing, feeling, thinking nothing but it — and not realize it at all. Because one is so stupid. Takes it for granted. That's what we do.'

'Not you.'

'Oh, yes. Yes. I: I worst of all. Because you are dead right, horribly right. The war is not an outside thing — it's like one of those chemicals that you drop in and then everything, everything, is changed: the colours shift, the values alter, but in some sort of system of relations so that you don't notice. But you're affected, too, deeply. Because its power over you is that it is *in* you.'

She had got up now, and was moving restlessly about the room.

'I've talked of nothing else, thought of nothing else, for years: it seems, now, for ever; but all the same I didn't see... I ought to have begun to see when I found it so awfully difficult to go on back to the time when it wasn't. All day I've been living back into that time. And it wouldn't join on. There was a gap I couldn't get across. I expect I seemed dazed and queer when you came in: I was staring down into that gap and lost in it. But now... now I begin to see. No, you go to bed now: you're dreadfully tired, I can see: and there's to-morrow evening. I'll sit by the fire for a bit. I want to take in what you've said.'

CHAPTER IV

I

THE war. She had got to think about the war: to fit it in. It was the key. Somehow. But how was she to think about it? It was not a thing: it was a state of being. In the daytime you could think about darkness: shut your eyes, in the light, and there it was. Not quite real, though, for the light was there, waiting for you when you opened them, and you knew it. But in the night, when it was all round you, when there was nothing else but it, when eyes shut or eyes open made no difference, darkness was not a fact outside you: then, you were it and it was you. And darkness was a fatuously inadequate simile: darkness was quiet and left you to yourself; this was a raging, all-absorbing pain, that ate you up. It was a toothache, but one that ached all over you: that could not be localized: that no dentist could cure or assuage. It was everywhere, it entered into everything: nowhere was there any escape from it. It was yours, and at the same time, it was everybody else's: there was nothing you felt that thousands of other people were not feeling too: the worst that happened, or you could imagine as happening, to you, was happening to them; and not to one or two of them, but to countless armies, in places whose names you hardly knew.

There was no getting used to it, for it was always taking on new forms. At first, when she was nursing in Lady Henshaw's hospital, she thought that she knew all there was to be known of pain and horror: the sights and sounds and smells of physical torment haunted her day and night. But

that was only the first stage. Looming beyond it was the unimaginable, which made men welcome wounds, however hideous, because they took them away, for a spell, from what people at home cheerily called 'soldiering.' Beyond that, again, more dreadful in their significance even than the battlefield, were the council-chamber, the newspaper office, and the drawing-room, in which the battlefield was taken for granted, and men and women said it must go on, and talked of the sacrifices they exacted from others as though they constituted a merit of their own.

And she had been one of these people. Her imagination, which was her conscience, had failed, like everybody else's — and with less excuse than most. Her father, a staunch Gladstonian, had brought her up to regard war as a crime and folly: the whole of his thinking and his talk to her had set her mind in the same direction. Yet when the impossible happened, her mind had only been able to dress it up as an opportunity — an opportunity for being, personally, noble. It was not easy now to retrace the steps of that distortion: 1917 and 1914 seemed to belong to different worlds and to be inhabited by different people: she was not, now, the person she had been then. The whole thing had crashed down on her, and found her absolutely unprepared. She was caught up, swept off her feet by a great general tide of feeling. Here was something big; she must meet it in a large spirit: must be adequate, must not be left out, must participate, in a word, in herd emotion. Doing right then had an aureole of pain around it, and ancestral promptings, deeper rooted than her father's teaching, identified the painful and the right and supported and sanctified the obligation to do and think as everyone else was doing and thinking. Even the plain evil of the whole thing had no salutary power then; that, by some amazing yet universal sleight of mind, was transferred

in toto to the enemy; he incarnated and absorbed it: hatred of him became one's service and tribute to right. She had felt a sudden glow of pure patriotism as she saw her own country sloughing off the materialistic wrappings of comfort and of indifference, rising up to champion ideal values. Even Bluehills had shared in this; its old aloof disconnection seemed to have dropped off from it, and it became part of England. People who had never seemed to her to care about anything but making money showed that they could care for something else, and she felt that she had wronged them.

She had believed what they believed: had believed passionately, had seized upon it with the fevered clutch of a mind stilling some dull voice within itself which doubted and questioned. A flush mounted to her cheek, even now, as she recalled herself leaping to her feet at a recruiting meeting in Bluehills and pouring out words — in which she believed then so fervently that she roused an audience whom Sir Michael Henshaw had wholly failed to stir. She remembered, too, how she had been able to do it. Sir Michael! How she admired Sir Michael in those days: what a stay and support she had found in him! There was an intellectual and a scholar, a man of fine mind and delicate sensibility, whose learning and research had not availed to dull his conscience or take the edge off his ideals. Again and again in the past he had used his international reputation to give weight to his appeals, when extreme sensitiveness to injustice and suffering forced him, again and again, to stand forth as the lone champion of oppressed peoples and unpopular causes: the friend of Macedonia, of the Congo, of Kenya; the tireless advocate of humane slaughter and the Anti-Plumage Bill; the man who had made Liberalism respectable even in Bluehills, where all the best people were Conservative: though Bluehills, of course, was much too small and unimportant to

be his sphere of action. For her Sir Michael had in those days done everything.

When, with a sense of the world suddenly turning on its axis, one week-end had smashed the settled solid frame of things and, between a Saturday and a Tuesday, everything stable and familiar had shot down into the void, she had felt completely submerged by something too huge for her to comprehend. Nothing had had any outline or meaning until she met Sir Michael, and then Sir Michael, with that rare power of his of thinking it worth while to talk even to the stupidest person, had explained everything — or so it had seemed to her at the time. He had lifted the whole thing up to the plane of ideas. There was a right idea of life — the British, based on decency and kindness and the ideals of Christ and Plato; and a wrong, the German, based on force and dragooning and intolerant cruelty. And the false idea threatened the true. She could hear him, that fine white head of his thrown back and his eyes full of light, standing talking to her in Market Street, utterly regardless of the jostling people.

'As I see it, it is a tragic but at the same time a great opportunity — one of those big spiritual crises that come to nations as they do to individuals. Some great emergency compels one to see. Then one has to sacrifice little feelings to big and come out clearly and bravely for the values one believes in, whatever it costs. The material forces in Europe are challenging the spiritual: surrender would be the death of our souls. If our bodies have to suffer, nay, perish, we must face that. The issue is quite simple. Simple, yes: but big and clear.'

She had raised her eyes to Sir Michael's, so blue, so far away, and felt a profound gratitude to him, and a deep elevation of spirit. What he had said seemed to join on to the

things her father used to say to her: he talked the language she understood. But at the meeting he talked in these terms to the people of Bluehills, gathered in the Town Hall, and they had sat just stolidly looking at him. They were silent: they were respectfully attentive: that was all. Their faces did not stir: their eyes stared up at him, with no responsive spark in them. It was late in September — the retreat from Mons was over; the terrible messages of 'The Times' correspondent, describing the broken and defeated army, had flashed home; Paris was in danger; everything was in danger. But they sat there, as if none of this were real to them. To Jean the whole thing was fearfully real. She thought she could picture it: she saw pictures of it in her sleep. The sense of everything in existence that mattered hanging on the courage and endurance of those men out there worked in her blood and made it boil. And this evening there was something more. Harold had come home unusually early, between four and five. He had found her at the piano, and had signed to her not to get up, to go on playing. Curious, for some impulse had set her down to Beethoven's tremendous variations on a waltz by Diabelli. That old Schlidt in Dresden had allowed her ever to play them was the biggest thing she had brought back. He had told her frankly that the weakness of her little fingers cut her off from any idea of concert performance. 'It is a pity,' he had said. 'You have the mind: it is more uncommon than the fingers. There are not five men in the world who have both the mind and the fingers for the Variations. You can play them, to yourself: I allow that: and to me.' At times, when she asked herself whether her music was worth while, whether she had been justified in spending so much time on it, she thought of that. To be able to play the Variations to herself — and to Harold — yes, that was well worth while. It was like Harold that he

could *hear* them; especially the ones at the end; them, she sometimes thought, he heard more fully than she did. She played them now: he sat quite still in his deep chair, a pipe between his lips. When she finished, there was a long moment of silence. The sound of the buzzer tore the air — the wind was in the south, and when it was in the south they heard the noise of Bluehills clearly. Suddenly, Harold's voice.

'I'm going, Jean. I fixed it up this morning.' He spoke casually, with no more emphasis than if he had been saying he was going to Manchester in the morning. That was really all he had said about it. Then and later, he had been entirely matter of fact and unemotional. She had been full of pride in him; when he added, 'I know that this is going to be much harder for you than for me,' of something like worship. She had believed it; believed that it was indeed harder for her; that it was her sacrifice and one she ought to make. She had put all the exaltation, the sublime lift of the last Beethoven Variation into that. Horrible... No wonder she had not been able to play them since.

When, at the recruiting meeting, she had risen to speak — 'Mrs. Claviger, whose husband has just joined up' — this pride and this belief had vibrated in her voice, and within a few seconds she knew that she had 'got' the meeting, as Sir Michael had been unable to do. It was a sensation she had never quite had again — that thrilling correspondence between her voice and the nerves of all the people sitting there listening: that power to say things she had not known she thought, which seemed to come to her from them and by her to be given back to them with extraordinary new authority. While it lasted, it was tremendous. The Chairman had whispered to her, when she sat down amid a thunder that almost frightened her, 'Splendid, Mrs. Claviger. That's done it: we shall get fifty or a hundred easily.'

But, coming out, she had met Jimmy Dalton with Zillpah hanging on his arm: and Jimmy's face was dark and unresponsive: he was not going to be one of the fifty or a hundred — she knew that. She paused to ask Zillpah how the little girl was, and felt Jimmy's aloofness as positively menacing. He said nothing, although they generally had a great deal to say to one another. Indeed, his friendship was one of the things that were most worth while to her in Bluehills. She had been deeply touched when, only three or four months ago, Jimmy had come to see her and told her that he and Zillpah wanted the baby to have her name.

'Zillpah's fair set on her being Liza — but we'd both feel real proud if she could be Jean too. And Liza Jean'd make a rare name.' This from Jimmy was much: and in the weeks when Zillpah hung between life and death, she had acquired both liking and respect for the young man. Under his rather angular, aggressive manner — forced on him, she began to see, by solitude; by the need to express with almost brutal force ideas that no one shared — he had a queer disarming sensitiveness. Things got him on the raw — and he hit out because he was hurt. If she had liked nothing else in him — and she grew to like a great deal — she would have liked him because of his deep affection for Harold. Politically, he was a follower of Stephen Henshaw's — though he did not think Stephen went far enough. But as man Harold was his hero. She knew that at first he had felt grave doubts as to whether she was good enough for Harold. She lent him books, of the most varied sorts — she had expected him to want only history and sociology, but poetry and biography, it appeared, were what he mostly cared for. They had argued about the books, and about other things: he was easier to talk to than anyone else she had met in the town; and her feeling, in all this, was that she was learning more from

Jimmy than she had to teach him. Once when she asked him whether there were many young people in Bluehills who thought and felt as he did, he had shrugged his shoulders and replied:

'Folks in Bluehills are only half alive.'

It had reminded her, as Jimmy often did, of Carlyle — 'It is you who are already half alive whom I will summon into life.' Jimmy was the sort of person who might do that. Half alive; the people at the meeting had, at first, hardly seemed that. Yet she had roused them. On Jimmy, so alert, so swiftly responsive to what was fine, she had counted to agree with her. Now, looking into his sombre eyes, she knew he did not. He did not look angry — worse, he looked disappointed and aloof. After Zillpah had answered her questions about Liza Jean — Zillpah, who, as a rule, merely listened, with her gentle, timid smile, putting in a rare word now and then — an awkward silence fell. For some reason she did not feel ready to challenge that silence; to ask Jimmy what he thought. They parted, with an uncomfortable sense of unresolved division. She hurried home. Harold must talk to Jimmy.

On to that one day everything seemed to be huddled, so that it stood up, an island of distinctness, in a time whose geography she could not clearly draw, which came back only as a shapeless shifting archipelago. For when she got home there was more light in Harold's window than if he were still writing the letters at which she had left him when she went out; and in the hall, on the table below the great ormolu clock — a presentation to Mr. Claviger on the occasion of his silver wedding, from the employees at his three mills — was a hat, a hat of pale grey felt that could not possibly belong to any friend of Mr. Claviger's. There was a line of light under his door — he no doubt was cele-

brating his son's enlistment in his usual way, and required no company. The owner of the felt — who could it be? no one in Bluehills save Harold wore a felt: the bowler for the master and the cloth cap for the man were there universal — must be upstairs with Harold. How annoying!

He was. When she opened the door, Harold was in the chair facing her on one side of the fire: in the other a man who had sunk so low in it that as she entered she saw no head, only a pair of feet on the fender and one long thin hand extended along the arm of the chair: a hand with curiously long fine fingers, square at the ends: the little finger, with a green seal ring on it, nearly as long as the others. She could see that hand now with the last distinctness, against the mouse-coloured corduroy of the armchair, with the cigarette held at an angle between the second and third finger — a trick later to become very familiar. It was Stephen Henshaw.

As usual, her first feeling was that he was cruelly plain; her second that something about him was interesting, so interesting and so question-setting that this riddling aspect ate up any other. His features were all wrong: he had a long nose and a short chin; his forehead was so wide and his chin so narrow that his whole face seemed out of drawing — an effect enhanced by the portentous darkness and thickness of his eyebrows. Under those eyebrows, fringed by lashes that a woman could have envied, long and thick and dark, and softly curling upwards at the corners, Stephen had eyes that held whoever met them and would not let him go. Even so, as he stood up now beside Harold she again felt him so plain that she was almost sorry for him: plain, but full of arrogance, and of a kind of power that made any such feeling ridiculous.

'I find I've arrived too late,' he said. 'The fatal deed is done.' He looked at Harold.

'Did it go off all right?' Harold was asking her.

'Oh, yes. They even made me speak.'

Harold's eyes sparkled. 'Bravo!' He patted her on the shoulder. 'And they liked you?'

'Well enough.' With Stephen there it was somehow impossible to describe the occasion as naturally she would have done. He spoiled everything: his smile was ironic, not sympathetic.

'Stephen, I find, thinks me the complete ass,' he went on.

On this she looked up at Stephen, to find his eyes on her, with an expression she resented, because somehow it suggested pity: and pity in Stephen, who scoffed at everything, could only mean contempt. The searchlight of his eyes was a searchlight into ugliness.

'The person who does surprise me, Harold, and in whom I am really disappointed, is your wife.'

Jean felt the colour rushing to her cheeks and she saw Harold's quick frown gathering. To prevent his speaking she said, with a laugh:

'What did you expect of me, then?'

'I thought,' he replied instantly, his eyes still holding hers, 'that you would have used your head. After all, you're not like my father: as a Liberal he was committed: he knows these people personally and they've flattered him. Besides he's over fifty... He can't help having the old ideas; he's thought himself advanced for so long that he doesn't see that he's stereotyped. I don't blame him...'

'Blame him!'

Stephen disregarded the gesture in which her sense of his impertinence broke through.

'But you... That's another matter. You ought to be free. Harold's got Cambridge and Winchester to clog his mind, but you...'

'I like that!' cried Harold. 'You're for ever chatting about freedom, and putting some fantastic interpretation of your own upon it. If you're getting back to your old argument that freedom means accepting no obligations, never entering on to any permanent relation, you know what I think about that. It's bunk. I suppose you still think marriage means giving up freedom?'

'I do.'

Harold exchanged a smile with Jean.

'Well, that's enough for me. You don't know what you're talking about. It's the same here. I'm an Englishman: I can't just stand aside. Even if I wanted to — which I don't.'

'Even if your country's wrong?'

'It isn't.'

Stephen shrugged his shoulders.

'And even if it were... I shouldn't leave Jean because she did something I disliked... Only if I ceased to love her...'

'Oh, dislike!' Stephen exclaimed indignantly. 'It's not as easy as that. That's evading. If she did something you knew to be wrong, you'd accept it, involve yourself in it, do it too? Say it was right? That's what I mean, you see. What's involved, in the end, is your saying something is right which you know to be wrong. The finish of that is your thinking it right. Then you're lost, everything is lost, even the idea of right is lost. What's happened to you — and to Jean, too, I see — is that you've handed over your freedom of thought. I'm more disappointed in her because it's easier for her to help it; besides — or so I used to think — she has anyhow a less rigid, quicker brain than yours.'

'Granted,' said Harold.

Stephen looked expectantly at her.

'Your idea of clear thought seems to be that one thinks differently from everyone else,' was all she found to say.

'You're like the people who refuse to hear anything in Beethoven because he's admittedly great. Surely there are times when the general sense is right: things big enough to get below superficial differences.'

He shook his head. 'There may be. This isn't one of them. There's nothing big about war — except the scale of calamity and destruction, which in this case is going to be beyond our imaginations. War is murder — that's all. It's not a new remark, but it's true. Organized mass murder. Nothing else. It's one of the few things one can be certain about. Harold is going out to kill. And you are pleased. That's all I see in it. If he were going to kill other Englishmen, even one other Englishman, you'd be appalled. Because they're Germans... what difference does that make? If he happened to be a German, you, as a German wife, would send him out, with proudly repressed tears, to kill Englishmen. I hoped that women — some women — would see murder for what it is. My mother doesn't: my sisters don't. Now you don't. My mother and sisters can't see. They don't do their own thinking: they've let Father do that for them for too long. But there's no reason, no excuse, for you...'

'That's all very well,' said Harold. It was to be a standing note in the talk of these days that Jean, who generally had so much to say, could not gather her feelings to the point of speech, while Harold, normally silent in abstract discussion, carried on. 'But you're arguing outside the conditions. In real life, choices between absolute right and wrong don't occur. One has to act at a point where, wrong having been committed, the ideal course is closed. We didn't want this: we don't now. We didn't invade Belgium.'

'We were quite ready to. Our military staff had got plans for it, with the French.'

'Maybe. But in point of fact it was the Germans who did it. And they did it as part of a plan, as the expression of a view of life, if you like, which we reject, because we know it's barbarous. Anyhow, they start murdering. What are we to do? We think murder wrong. Are we to stand by and let them do it? Or are we to take the only means available as things are, to stop them? Are we to let right go by default? Am I, as an individual, to leave other people to defend it while I keep my own hands clean and feel superior?'

'What concerns you is your own rightness — first. You think murder is wrong?'

'Of course,' said Harold, after a moment, as Stephen seemed to wait for an answer.

'Very well. You think it wrong. Then you mustn't do it. If you don't act on your own feeling, how can you say you believe it? How can any belief be sustained? The whole thing goes, on that. As for feeling superior, for God's sake don't be afraid of that. People who *are* superior ought to feel it.'

'I think your point of view is perfectly horrible.' Jean suddenly felt she could bear no more. 'You just go about undermining everything. You don't believe in anything yourself and won't let others either.'

Stephen regarded her bleakly. To her surprise he looked serious, even sad.

'Horrible? Because I see horrors and won't pretend they're beautiful? Horrible because I won't say and can't see that this war is either righteous or inevitable? Oh no. If you see evil for what it is it won't infect you. But if you say it's good, then the poison enters in. For God's sake open your eyes before it is too late. If you can't see the conscience point, at least save Harold from the holocaust. If a

dozen men like him would stand out, this thing might be stopped, even now. After all, it'll have to stop some day: we shall have to live with Germans again.'

'I don't understand you, Stephen,' said Harold. 'I can't see what you want me to do. This thing has started. I dare say you, being in the House of Commons, know more about its beginnings than I do. I can't see that they concern me now much: we send you to look after that. It's here. That's the situation. As a nation we're involved. We've set our hands to a fight. Perhaps we ought not to have: leave that for the moment. But we have. You're wasting your time. You go on thinking: it's your job, not mine. I'm not clever: I can think about concrete things, but this is beyond me. All you say may be true and a lot more. I can't see that it makes much difference. It's not thinking that is wanted now from ordinary men like me. I've done the amount of it I can and that concerns me and nothing you could say would move me. I'm for it. It may be cowardice: I dare say you think it is. No, Jean, I see his argument — I haven't got the guts to go against the others: but to me it would look like desertion to leave them to do it for me.'

'Sentimentalist,' said Stephen, but not unkindly. He got up. 'Well, I'm sorry. The more sorry that I know you'll agree with me before you've done.'

Harold went downstairs to see him out. He came up again shaking his head.

'Queer, isn't he? I suppose there's a lot in what he says, but it doesn't seem real, somehow.'

'Hateful person,' said Jean.

'Oh, no. I'm sorry for him.'

'Sorry for him? Yes: I'm sorry for a man who believes in nothing.'

Harold was standing thoughtfully looking at the fire.

'Nothing? Oh, he believes in more than he knows.'

'But he's such a cad in other ways.'

'A cad? What are you thinking of?'

'Well, Esther Exton. What can he see in her?'

'She's very handsome.'

'Yes, but such a fool.'

'Stephen's always been queer about women. He's full of theories — at Cambridge, you know, he was a great feminist. In spite of his affairs I don't think he's ever been in love. He's looking for something amazing and constantly thinks he's found it — then when it proves not to be so, he turns round and is perfectly brutal.'

'Esther will scratch if he turns round on her. But Harold, do you agree with any of what he was saying?'

'Agree? Oh, I don't know. It doesn't seem to me to matter. You can't approve or disapprove of a thunderstorm. You go out and do what you can. I'm not really much interested in his argument.'

No. Harold was not. He could and to all appearances did leave it. The brief period of cloud that had overhung him in the first weeks of August had been no more than the struggle of making up his mind. That done, his natural good spirits returned, and he threw himself into the arrangements for his departure with his usual cheerfulness and an utter absence of any kind of solemnity. Mrs. Claviger showed an inclination to be tearful; Cassie was positively dolorous; but he would have none of it, nor allow Jean to make a hero of him. His attitude was purely business-like. There was a new job to be learned: he settled down to learn it. He applied for an officer's commission and laughed at what he called her romanticism when he discovered that Jean was a little disappointed: had wanted him to be a private.

'Nonsense,' he said. 'The one thing I know I can do is to

take responsibility. I've no business to shirk that. I hope I shall be a general before I've done.'

There were moments when she suspected him of enjoying the whole thing: and told him so. He laughed.

'Why not? I've sat in the same chair at the mills for ten years. It's getting shiny; I'm getting stiff. I shall soon get tired of forming fours and cleaning buttons, I know — but it's a change.'

The weeks rushed by: between Harold's joining up and his going out there seemed no time at all. Actually, there was the minimum: he proved exceedingly efficient; his trick of throwing the whole of himself into whatever he was doing served him here; it no doubt also accounted for the fact that he seemed light-hearted throughout, and would permit no kind of solemnities. After a period at Woolwich, during which they were in London but she hardly seemed to see him, there followed another period on Salisbury Plain; early in February, 1915, he sailed for France. About his departure there was no fuss; only, he left her certain charges. She was to look after his mother; not to be afraid of his father. Mr. Claviger had paid the new conditions the tribute of relative sobriety, but that could not be expected to last. He was evidently of pretty much one mind with Harold as to the futility of talk about the war; seemed, at a time when most of his fellow manufacturers were dithering with apprehension as to the ruin it was bound to bring on the cotton trade, to be occupied, mainly, in far-reaching plans for a period, which he foresaw, when trade would boom again; a fact that made Jean's heart sink, for it meant that he did not share the view then prevalent that it would be over in no time. And Mr. Claviger had a horrid trick of being right in his business calculations. For the rest, a period in which savage competitive impulses were unleashed rather pleased

him: when storms of that sort were released, his stark brutality made him the man to ride them.

'Father will be all right so long as he has lots to do — and with me away, he'll have that,' Harold said. 'Don't be frightened of him: stand up to him; he has a respect for you, anyhow. And I want you to keep an eye on Jimmy Dalton.'

On that she looked her surprise.

'I know,' he said. 'He always was a queer lad. Now, war's "a capitalist conspiracy against the workers," eh? Well, I dare say I'd think so if I were in his shoes. He's sincere and I'd hate to have him persecuted. We don't want unwilling soldiers, do we? Father's promised to do the fair thing by him, but Jimmy's apt to anger him. I don't want him bullied. Just keep in touch. And, for yourself, I'm inclined to think you'd best take on some work; most of it's pretty little use, I know, but — well, this thing doesn't stand sitting and thinking about, does it?'

He departed... and the bottom fell out of her courage: she felt utterly wretched and bereft. Within a few days, unable to stand doing nothing, she got taken on as a probationer nurse at the hospital Lady Henshaw had equipped at The Pyes, and for the next nine months was engulfed in its routine. Then, at last, in the darkest days of December, Harold came home, on his first leave.

She gave herself a shake. The fire was out. Roberta had been in bed for hours; she had better follow her example. She was very tired: perhaps she might even fall asleep.

II

PERHAPS she had slept: perhaps that was why, when she took up the thread of her thoughts again, she was not in any bed she seemed to know. Eyes wide open, she lay on her

back, perfectly still, staring up at the ceiling. How dirty it was — or was that the effect of the yellowish light coming through the frowsty lace curtains? No, the dirt was real, and that crack right across was most unsafe: if the people overhead who had made such a noise last night were to move with any violence, the plaster would gape and suddenly she would see a foot coming through. She recalled a play at Drury Lane when, through just such a hole, an umbrella had been stuck to catch the fragments made by the burglar as he dropped. He would drop right on her if he came. How long ago that was! the first time she and Harold had done anything together by themselves in London; gay and carefree, like a couple of children on holiday, Drury Lane had seemed just right: one more sign of the way their moods ran together. Very uncomfortable, now, if anything did come through, for it would not kill her, it would wake Harold. And not to wake Harold was very important, though why it was important was just what she did not want to think about.

She tried to go back to her game with the ceiling, but it was no good. She stared at the window — a greyish yellowish square, lighter than the rest of the room, but not very light yet. Then her eyes travelled over the rest of what she could see of the room. It was not much: the end of the bed blocked most of it, the more effectively that it was draped with Harold's British warm; the only other thing she saw distinctly was his service cap on the back of the door and, winking back at her from the mirror, a gleam of steel: his pistol on the dressing table. It was full of Harold, the room, and Harold lay beside her; that was his breathing, deep and regular; if she turned her head just the tiniest bit she could see him. Twelve hours ago — any time during the massed accumulation of hours that made up the past nine months —

just to see Harold was all she asked. She still wanted, desperately, painfully to see him, but to see him without waking. She did not want him to wake, yet. But see him she must. Very carefully she shifted the position of her head — she had to be careful, for it rested on his arm — so that she could see. He had gone to sleep long before she had — sleep indeed had stayed far from her — and was still sunk, his face suggested, into dreamless depths. Yes: her need to look at him was justified: there he was, the Harold she saw in her dreams, not the stranger, masquerading in his external guise, of yesterday. Surely it was only a nightmare illusion: she had been overwrought, strung too tight: she had imagined things. That endless wait at the station; the train two hours late; then the hustle and bustle — the atrocious moment in which she had failed to find him, had suddenly felt that some disaster must have occurred: that everybody else's love had come but hers not, that she stood desolate and abandoned — and then, suddenly, seeing him, not looking for her, standing quite still, staring in front of him, as though neither the station, nor he, nor she were real, as though he saw something quite other. Even when she laid a hand on his sleeve he had, for a dreadful instant, turned on her a face of petrifying blankness. Of course he had told her not to come. All that had jangled her nerves. Even in the cab he had said nothing: only held her hand so hard that it hurt, and stared out of the window with eyes that she was again sure saw nothing. He held her hand: but he was far away from her, not aware of her. Then at last, upstairs, safe in their own room, with the door closed and everything else shut out, he had seized hold of her, crushed her in his arms, burned face and neck with hungry savage kisses, taken her, saying nothing, only uttering queer almost animal grunts, and in his eyes — a look that suddenly brought

his father to her mind. She had longed for his arms, hungered for his kisses — but his passion had frightened her; she had had a moment of revolt against it. A man, undifferentiated, had seized woman, equally undifferentiated. Beauty, tenderness, companionship — of these there was no hint: only an awful, primitive hunger. And he had not even noticed her revolt.

Fearful, she searched his face: nothing there to frighten her. In sleep, with the hair above his low broad forehead ruffled and curling over his ears, and his mouth curved in a sweet, almost childish droop, the resemblance to the Barberini Faun was as strong as it had been at her first sight of him, sleeping with one arm under his head amongst the sun-steeped heather. There was strength in the face: in the powerful modelling of the jaw and the broad jut of the level brow; but beyond its strength was its kindness; and kindness had, in the years of their life together, seemed to her a quality more and more adorable. Kind people were fearfully rare: far rarer than clever. She knew ever so many clever people, but kind — hardly any. Harold was both. He had a swift brain and amazing hands, yet he respected the feelings of those who had neither. It was not only that he was kind to her: he loved her, so that perhaps was easy; he was kind to his intolerable father and not much more tolerable mother; kind to his sister; kind to the people who worked for him; kind even to her beloved kitten Tamar; she could see his strong hand moving over Tamar's soft fur — the very idea of tenderness, for her, was in that action of Harold's hand. And so, till to-night, his hand on her had always been. But then it had been that of an angry, hungry stranger — dishonouring: Gunther in Siegfried's guise.

A spasmodic contraction twisted his sleeping brow: his nostrils dilated; his lips opened and worked; his face, dis-

torted by some images — images of fear and pain — passing within the sealed chamber of his brain, was unbelievably altered. His eyes opened, dilated to their full extent: it was not the slow emergence of the mind from drowsiness but a swift leap out of nightmare. Almost at the same instant, he started up, jerking his arm and shoulder so abruptly that she was thrown onto his chest. She heard the quick, hard intake of his breath, then the long shuddering sigh with which, his surroundings realized, actuality driving off nightmare, he dropped back onto the pillow. For a moment his body was still, tense, rigid; then it too relaxed; and she felt him lie back and waited to feel his arm, under her, close round and over her, press her to him. She waited; his arm lay inert, his body motionless. Had he gone to sleep again? Half of her clamoured to lift her head; to meet his eyes; to give her lips to his lips; to speak to him, above all to hear his voice, which, so it now seemed to her, she had hardly yet heard; half of her was afraid. Face hidden — hers and his — she was safe; she was with her own Harold, not the terrifying stranger of the night. When he spoke she too would raise her head and look at him. Not till then. But minute after minute passed and still he did not speak. She listened intently: caught no sound of breathing. He had not fallen asleep again, he was simply lying there motionless, remote, looking at nothing, with the unseeing eyes that had frozen her last night.

In the room it was not much lighter. Either the sun was dim or the blind so dirty that its rays were caught and impeded: but it must be morning now, for there were sounds about them in the hotel. Creaks overhead: feet along the corridor: the slamming of a door not far away, and a voice, harsh and urgent, 'Damn you, where's my haversack — I shall miss my train'; more confused talking: from quite near,

it seemed just outside their door indeed, a noise like sobbing: then a woman's voice — 'Dick, Dick, don't go, don't go: I can't bear it.' Sharp at first, the voice trailed off: there was silence again. She might not be able to bear it — but Dick had to go, and he had gone.

He had gone, but Harold was here. How stupid everything else, in the light of that! Jean turned sharply and, on an overpowering impulse of tenderness, took his face between her hands and kissed it. For a moment he suffered her caresses: that was all: except that his face felt warm from sleep she might as well have been kissing a marble image — that head of Apollo which as a small child she had warmed by taking to bed with her, and kissed every morning as it lay beside her on the pillow; his eyes were open, but she kissed them shut.

'Don't, Jean, don't. You don't know what you are doing to me.' A strangled voice from far away — could it really be his? — strove to stay her, or so it seemed. But she was heedless. Whatever it cost her, whatever it waked in him, she must get through, she must take hold of Harold: must be real to him: must break down this stony wall.

Suddenly, unbidden and irresistible, tears rushed to her eyes. She was not given to crying: she had not wept when he went to the front; the hard anguish of his absence had never melted into tears; but now a passion of sobs shook her and the silly water poured from her eyes, down on to his face, in little rivulets. She did not know why she was crying: she howled like a child or a dog, as though unable to stop. His rigid arms moved, closed round her, gathered her to his breast; he was kissing her and, at last, speaking, murmuring the silly endearments and baby phrases of the past into her ear. 'Darling, darling, don't. You'll make me cry too. Don't, dearest: it's no good. We can't help it. We're

caught, caught like silly flies. Oh, don't cry: don't make me: don't bring it back. Hide me in your breast and let me forget it, just for a moment.'

He murmured on; she hardly heard him; darkness closing round her, but her pain, ignorant, uncomprehended, was melting into a warm unconsciousness of everything except his encompassing arms. It was not her pain really: dimly she felt that it was his, not hers, that had made her cry: a pain he neither would nor could utter, which had such possession of him that he was only its vehicle, had no longer any separate conscious life of his own. She had been afraid of him: that now was lost in a sense of being sorry, so sorry that she, too, was reduced to nothing but it. If to escape he had to hurt her, let him. So long as she understood, it could not, did not matter.

It did not even hurt; for Harold, this morning, was gentle and kind again, as the real Harold always had been. Gentle and kind — but terribly unhappy. Stupid, worse than stupid she had been not to see that — criminally stupid to have forgotten it. She had never known him unhappy before. He was meant for gladness and she had almost always known him glad; he had taken her sunshine with him, when he went out in February, and she had expected him to bring it back. But for him an experience she could not imagine had filled that gap. He had told her nothing about it; now, its form and features began to loom up before her.

'Harold — can't you tell me what it's like? You haven't told me anything. I'm beginning to realize what it isn't like. The nonsense in the newspaper... that makes me sick.'

'No, no,' he muttered. 'I can't. You wouldn't understand even if I tried. It can't be done. No. No. Leave that. Let me pretend it isn't, just for a moment. It's so hard, do you know, to believe that *this* is real: that I am

here — in London: Euston Station Hotel, No. 235 — and you: that this really is you that I touch and taste, and not a vanishing dream; I want to get that into my mind as a fact: to have it, while I'm here and nothing else but it.' He took one of her hands and laid it over his eyes. 'I can't do it for myself, but you can do it for me. Yes: this is real: that' — a sort of shudder passed through his frame, which made her tremble — 'is a bad dream. You anyhow have nothing, nothing, to do with it.'

His breath died away on a long sigh and, his eyes still shut, he relapsed into silence. Outside there was increasing noise and bustle: bells ringing, people stamping along the passages: the dull square of the window was gradually growing yellower: indeed now something that must be a gleam of sunshine was filtering through the opaque tissue of the blind and the grey network of the curtains, for it played over the glasses on the wash-hand-stand and picked out the brass buttons on Harold's tunic so that they winked at her like so many knowing little eyes. He was not going to talk; she must not try to make him. She must accept ignorance, and bear it as best she could. It seemed all she could do for him. She wanted to get up: to shake off the dark vapours the night had enwrapped her in: to find in trifling things an escape from her teasing mind. But Harold, generally fully awake and keen for action on the instant of his eyes opening, a morning person, as she was not, remained enwrapped in pretended drowsiness. He was awake, but refusing to seem so: awake for himself but not for her. She could only stare at the buttons and count them over and over again. They were like the precious minutes of her time, laughing at her as they fell away, one after the other, unused. At midday they had to catch the train for the north: return to Bluehills and the family. If only they need not go to Bluehills! If she

might only have him to herself for these precious ten days! But she had no hope of that. The Claviger family made plans: and these plans of theirs had an awful authority: composed months ahead, they worked out with the annihilating accuracy of a railway timetable, and often exhausted in advance any free enjoyment of the thing planned. Even Harold suffered from this timetable trick, and made schedules beforehand; when they escaped for a day together, the time and place of lunch, tea, dinner regulated their movements, and it had often been vain for her to suggest that it would be nice to explore this or that bypath or sit down for an uncounted hour to look at a view which was not entered on the itinerary. Now, whatever he felt, Bluehills was inevitable. He had planned to go by the one-thirty and by the one-thirty they went.

In that train there was only one through coach. She had never travelled by it without meeting someone in it she knew. To-day, she espied Frank Smithells in the corner seat by the door, when she and Harold deposited their things. Luckily he did not see them — he was occupied in being very important with a railway official; but after the temporary escape of lunch, they had to come back to their compartment, and there he was.

Smithells, roundabout, thickset, with a ruddy countenance and little bright brown eyes twinkling like buttons under almost invisible eyebrows, was always described as a 'thoroughly good fellow' — except by his workpeople, who saw a different side of him. He was a pillar of the Free Church in Bluehills and a prominent citizen, owning several small mills and one large one, and a member of the Town Council, where he was principally distinguished by his resistance to any proposal to reduce licenses. He at once looked up from his newspaper, crying heartily:

'Why, if it isn't Mr. — no, I beg pardon, Lieutenant Claviger. Well, now, this is a piece of luck for me. You'll be able to tell us — this is a friend from Leeds, Mr. Birchenough — the latest news. Everything going all right, I suppose?'

'Oh, yes,' Harold replied, with a grimness wholly lost on Smithells.

'Fine. Fine. The spirit of our men is wonderful. None of us have any call to be ashamed of our country now. Bluehills is doing its bit. Yes: though I'm afraid recruiting there isn't quite up to the mark. Of course Henshaw has made it difficult — very difficult. But this scheme of Lord Derby's'll pull them out. I've just been up seeing him on that. I hope we shall be able to get your help: a word from you'll be worth more than anything us old fellows can say. It's hard on us, you know: we're out of it: can only do the humdrum daily stunt behind the scenes.'

'Well,' said the man from Leeds, as Harold said nothing. 'I've given two lads to the army. They've not got out yet: still in training; but keen as mustard both of them. Oh, yes.'

'Bit of a godsend to your Tom, eh?'

The Leeds man frowned.

'Oh, no offence,' said Mr. Smithells easily. 'Those wild lads often shape out champion. I shouldn't wonder if he's the best soldier of the two: bit of devil'll be no harm there: ne can treat the Germans to it. How long do you think it will be before we get them on the run?'

Directly addressed, Harold had to reply. But all he said was, 'God knows.'

'Well — however long it takes we're prepared to stick it.'

Harold looked at him. 'Yes?'

Mr. Smithells did not feel the devastating note that Harold could throw into that simple monosyllable. In five years Jean had not discovered what to do when faced with it: she simply wilted into silence. Not so the worthy mill-owner. He became eloquent on the need of fighting on to victory.

'I'm prepared to close my mills if need be. Yes, I am. Of course it needn't come to that. The women will carry us on. Once these idiotic Trade Union regulations are dealt with. Hang it, we've all had to make our sacrifices.'

Harold merely looked at him. His eyes were without expression: but they gave Jean the feeling that between them and what they appeared to be looking at a shutter had been let down: no one was to see what was behind it. Perhaps not even Harold himself. The men did not seem to notice it; they talked on, as they always did. She had heard everything they had to say ever so often, but now each word was shot through with ironical double meanings, given by Harold's eyes. But he would not explain: the shutter was down.

At Claviger House, tea was on the table and everything exactly as usual. No particular sign of being pleased to see Harold: they behaved as if he had been no farther than London. That was their way: they prided themselves on not 'letting on' as they called it. Even Mrs. Claviger, though she had wept when she embraced her son, and kept looking at him with a woe-begone countenance, conformed to the code. Warmth of greeting was reserved for Tamar, Jean's kitten, now a large and, as a rule, very sedate cat, which suddenly leapt on Harold's shoulder and snuggled its black fur into his face, almost as though it felt that there were something lacking which it had to make good. The Clavigers seemed to see no difference in him: was there none? Was

it only her overwrought imagination, the effect upon her nerves of anxiety accentuated by hospital experiences, that made her fancy him altered? Surely, she knew him far better than they did. It was the inside Harold that was hurt, and the inside Harold that was hers. At tea, he seemed much as usual: he had many questions to put to his father about the mills. Mr. Claviger reported that they were still on full time, but about the future he was gloomy: he saw the shortage of raw cotton as a possibility. He did not ask Harold any questions; none of them did. To that extent, it seemed that they understood him better than she did. They tacitly pretended that there was nothing to ask. It occurred to her, with a wry grin, that they treated him as though he had been away in a nursing home, or some institution where he was cut off from life. Perhaps that was the truth; anyhow, it seemed to be what he preferred.

Upstairs, it was really much the same. He looked at some new books she had got, which were lying on the table; opened and shut them; laid them down, with, she thought, a sigh. Then he asked her to play to him. That ought to have pleased her: she sat down to the piano at once; she had had little time for playing while he had been away, but had remembered to have the instrument tuned: the tuner, a little old man with a passion for Bach, had looked shabbier and dustier even than she remembered him; he had told her he had had no work since the war. He did not know what he was to do; he was too old for the army. She stayed on her stool most of the evening: most of their other evenings, too. He listened, saying very little. Funny his feeling that words were dangerous, while music was safe. She did not find it safe; there were moments when it was difficult to control her fingers; she wanted to lift them off the notes that cried out, so loudly and poignantly, to ears that did not want to

hear. When he asked for the Beethoven Variations, she shook her head: said she was too out of practice. But it was not that: she could not. Strange, beyond that image of herself at the piano and his sitting, his long legs extended to the fire, she could not, now, recall anything from that first leave. In sum, it was obscurely disappointing; yet she could put her finger on nothing that was lacking. He did not frighten her again; she never again saw him as like his father; he was gentle, very silent, rather remote. It was as though, over the glass, there was a film: a breath that dimmed it: she could not see him distinctly. That was all. Something in him was in hiding, and she must let it hide. Her part seemed unimportant, irrelevant: she was asked only to keep quiet. It was a part that Zillpah, or someone like Zillpah, could have played better than she.

They went to see Zillpah one afternoon: and Liza Jean, now an adorable little toddling thing, sat on Harold's knee, and she could hardly bear it. Then Jimmy came in and he and Harold went off for a walk. She stayed with Zillpah (it was a Sunday) while they were away: it seemed a long time. They did not talk of anything much. Only Zillpah said:

'I'm afraid Jimmy is going to go.'

And when he and Harold came back together, Zillpah knew and she knew, too, that he was going to go. And on that she and Harold left them.

'Did you persuade him?' she asked, as they walked away. 'I've tried, you know, but couldn't.'

Harold looked at her, then quickly away.

'I?' he exclaimed. 'Good Lord, no. He's not as strong as he thought, poor Jimmy. Stephen — the speeches of his he's read — seem to have convinced him that he's got to go. Odd, isn't it? There's a sort of hypnotism about — and Jimmy's been given an awful time by the women: his mother

never stops nagging, it seems. Father's been quite decent. Of course he thinks the whole thing lunacy — he never wanted me to go.'

Jean was amazed.

'Didn't he really?'

'No — he thought either all the mills would go to pot — or other people would make profits while he missed them. To him it seems silly; why can't people fight in business instead of taking to machine guns? He likes the Germans, too; always did. You know Bismarck was a great hero of his?'

'I didn't,' Jean replied. 'But then I really know very little about him.'

'Yes. There's a lot to know; of course he's a barbarian, Father. But when he thinks he could run this show better than the people who are messing it up, he's not so far wrong. In this little world we see his faults: put him on the grand stage and you'd see one of our conquerors. But he'll never get the chance. Perhaps it's just as well.'

'I am sorry for Zillpah.'

'Yes,' said Harold, and left it at that.

When Lady Henshaw, rather to her surprise, sent her an urgent appeal to bring Harold out to tea, Jean expected that he would refuse to go. She wanted him to go, because Sir Michael was sure to be wise, helpful, and even encouraging — encouraging, because he always had so firm a hold on big issues. She knew that working among wounded had blurred her eyes: she could not, as someone had crudely put it, see the wood for the trees. Something the same, though infinitely worse, must have happened to Harold. But Sir Michael would see the wood and would make them see it too: his mind was never trammelled or tied to details: it

soared up into the air and, looking down, saw things in proportion. And he was at The Pyes: a rare event, since he was now constantly either in London or Paris, on mysterious missions of great import. And Harold consented to go, without demur, when he found she wanted it.

They went out in the car: along the road so drearily familiar to Jean, who pushed along it every morning on her bicycle and home again at night. There was a moment just at the turn, before the dip the road made before rising again to ascend the second ridge, from which the whole of Bluehills could be seen, spread out. Very black and grim it looked to-day with the December mists darkened and solidified to grey by the smoke pall hanging over it, and the chimneys poking up like black accusing fingers. Yet the scene had a formidable kind of beauty, when the pale hills rose, as they did to-day, like uncertain smudges on the horizon, blue enough in the thickening light to explain a name that generally seemed merely typical. Harold slowed down and sat regarding the familiar outline with unfamiliar eyes. Then, without saying anything, he swung the car round the bend of the road and the town was lost to view. The Pyes was far enough out to be quite clear of any sense of it, and the fine view from its windows was over open country — moors that stretched the whole way to Lancaster, without a chimney in between. The house — a long white Georgian structure with an L-shaped extension — was larger than it looked; its ample grounds were behind, invisible from the road. The approach was a mere lane with fields on either side: the drive, used for the convenient passage of ambulances, reached an entrance different from that normally used for the house. To Sir Michael, any display of consequence was repugnant. He always spoke of himself as a poor scholar, and inferentially eschewed participation in

Lady Henshaw's wealth. Rich when he married her, she was now much richer, since her father, a Chicago pork-packer, had left several millions to be divided between her and her sister. She had been building a new wing on to The Pyes before the war, although then she spent very little time there. A person of febrile vitality, seldom staying in one place or at one interest for long, she had moved on to other good works now that her hospital was in smooth running order. With her there was no hiding lights under bushels. Her movements were advertised; she was incessantly in the papers, and had the art of always looking handsome no matter where her portrait appeared. She was much more efficient than she looked, for she knew how to use either her money, her name, or her personal charm so as to buy people to be efficient for her. There was a certain piquancy always in her appearance as the chosen life companion of an idealist like Sir Michael. Hardly, however, would anyone have described their relationship in such terms. The air of solitude and unworldly detachment which he carried about with him caused a delicate compassion to perfume the admiration with which most women and not a few men regarded him. Very gently, but quite firmly, he seemed to waive any connection with his wife's wealth, her social brilliance, and the lightly cynical worldliness of her habitual conversation; always he was the aloof man of thought, pursuing a path that must in its nature be lonely, towards eternal truth. Had he been less austerely distinguished in bearing, as well as in reputation, Lady Henshaw's mere aspect and the subtle and elaborate comfort — so much more costly than any displayed luxury — with which she everywhere surrounded him might have suggested doubts of his single-mindedness, but he had only to appear, to triumph over that.

He was not visible when Harold and Jean were shown

into Lady Henshaw's boudoir — a smallish room, deliciously warm after the cold outside, and deliciously full of a mingled fragrance of carnations and muffins; but of course she was not alone. She never was.

'Sir Anselm Jardine — Mrs. Claviger, Mr. Claviger. I've persuaded Sir Anselm that he could leave the Treasury for a week-end; we came down last night in the car. We shan't win if our best brains are exhausted, shall we? And I really had to have his help with my new music room: the shell is there all right, but I'm not happy about the colours, and he really knows about colours. Michael will be down in a minute — he's in the hospital, going round the wards. Yes, a new convoy came in last night. He likes to look in now and then, when he's here, and of course it's good for the men to see him. And it helps him, he says; keeps up his contact with reality. Oh, no, we're quite comfortable, we hardly ever used anything but the new wing before, and that's just as it was. The other was always pretty cold, and the sanitation impossible and, short of pulling down the whole place, you couldn't alter it. Of course, being a great barn of a place, it does very well for a hospital. Though the nurses sometimes grumble about the cold. Not you, Jean: you're wonderful.'

Listening to Lady Henshaw as she ran gaily on, Jean, with the tail of her eye, was aware of Harold and Sir Anselm regarding each other like two suspicious dogs.

'Business pretty good here?' Sir Anselm was saying.

'I gather so. Patriotism is being made to pay.'

'Enlistment all right? M.P.'s influence not reflected in that, I gather?'

'Ah, yes.' Lady Henshaw was with them now. 'It's that, really, I'm afraid, that made you come, isn't it? You pretend it's to please me.'

'I don't. It's entirely to please myself,' replied Sir Anselm promptly.

'That's very pretty, and I hope true. But I'm afraid the other is the real reason. It's about Stephen anyhow that Michael wants to talk to you, Harold. Mr. Claviger was a great friend of Stephen's, you know. But let's have tea first: Michael will be down any minute.'

He actually appeared before the last of the cups had been handed round; looking more Dantesque than ever, with his aquiline head rising out of the long black velvet cloak he had wrapped round him for protection against the hospital passages.

'Ah, this is good, Harold, my boy. After seeing those poor fellows, especially. They would make one quail, shake one's courage, if anything could. But physical pain is not the worst: moral failure — that hurts far more deeply. I was talking to the little Belgian Colonel, Aimée; touching to see how pleased he was to hear his own language, and when I said to him, or tried to say, something of what we all feel about a nation that has once more proved how much grander it is to die free than to live in slavery, you should have seen how his face lit up. Human courage — what a glorious thing it is!'

His hand was on Harold's shoulder; but Harold merely looked uncomfortable. The shutter down over his eyes, they were dark, expressionless pools. When Sir Michael went on to ask him about France, where he was, how things were going, he answered in dry monosyllables. He was in the Salient; things were not going; the last attack had been a failure.

'Yes. Yes. We had to retreat, I know. And the casualties, shocking. Poor Templeton has lost his boy, Aimée: and Mrs. Gordon's second — she's a heroine, that woman:

given both her ewe lambs — he's blind. But these are not the people who murmur.'

He sighed deeply. Then, straightening his shoulders with almost a military gesture, he said, still addressing Harold:

'I want you to help us in a very difficult matter. I should call it tragic at any other time. It's about our poor boy — yes, Stephen. You probably have read what he has been saying? This last speech is only the culmination of a series. I know what I should feel about him — and do about him — if it were anyone else. And, at a time like this, that is how I must feel about him, even though he is my son — my only son. I have a duty to my country, a duty even to my town. Bluehills is sound — it ought not to be so misrepresented, and, in effect, traduced.'

'What has he done?' cried Jean, since Harold said nothing.

'Don't you know? Nor you?'

Harold shook his head.

'Well, I can only call his conduct treachery. You feel that, don't you, Jardine?'

'I do, I'm afraid. And that's the view, I may say, taken in the highest quarters.'

'But do explain.' It was Jean who spoke, since Harold apparently would not.

'There's very little to explain. Stephen, as you all know, has for very long now taken a kind of delight in disagreeing with me in public as well as private on every larger issue. On most I leave him wholly free. His private conduct — that, too, I leave. But when he uses such gifts as he has to undermine and weaken the morale of his own country and does so with the authority of a Member of Parliament, calls the Germans blameless, and suggests that the war should be stopped on their terms, then I feel I cannot reconcile it

with my conscience to do nothing. A lead must be given. I am ready to give it.'

'Yes?' said Harold, since he was now directly addressed.

'What I propose is that a meeting of citizens be summoned to the Town Hall to demand his resignation as Member of Parliament.'

'And if he refuses? He would, of course.'

'That's my difficulty,' said Jardine. 'Of course he would. And then I'm afraid we're stuck.'

Sir Michael listened as Jardine went on, with an expression of pained and lofty detachment, to expound the practical impossibility of getting rid of an M.P. in wartime.

'That may be. That may be. I don't understand these practical details. What I am concerned with is principle. An act of repudiation, a gesture of moral condemnation is demanded. That done, something profoundly important both to Bluehills and to our Cause would be on record. The effect of such a meeting, the moral effect, would be great. I want such a meeting. More: I am prepared to address it myself.'

This was too much for Lady Henshaw. She jumped to her feet in strong excitement.

'Oh, Michael, you couldn't. Oh, no, no. You mustn't do that.' Her fat little jewelled hands were clasped in unconscious appeal. But he was not looking at her; his eyes were wholly remote; there was a queer yellow glow in them: a sacrificial light.

'Of course' — she spoke now to the others — 'Stephen is impossible. He always was difficult, and now he has gone quite crazy. But always far the best thing, with him, is to take no notice. It has always been like that with him, ever since he was a boy: the one thing he can't bear is to have no

notice taken of him. He loves to tease, to annoy people; he wants everyone to be looking at him, talking about him. It vexes him to be out of the limelight. And to have everyone talking about the war — that has cut him to the quick. There's no star turn for him except to be agin it. Oh, I understand him. Michael never has. The only thing to do is to leave him absolutely alone. It is really, Michael.'

But Sir Michael shook his head. On his face was an expression of grave pain. It looked very white and drawn.

'It isn't merely a question of him. There is such a thing as conscience. Yes: I feel I ought to take a stand on this: to make my position clear. There are national issues involved. He's a Member of Parliament: he is supposed to be a representative. You agree with me, Jardine? And you, too, I am sure, Harold. We must hold a meeting: I must speak, whatever it cost me. Yes. I must.'

'It's very fine of you,' Jardine murmured.

'I'm not thinking of myself. Claviger, you'll support me? You're prominent in the town; a friend of his; a British officer — it would have great weight, great weight.'

Did the change in address from the intimate Harold to the formal Claviger mark his quick sense of Harold's unresponsiveness? Perhaps. It was more indeed than unresponsiveness. To her astonishment, Jean heard him say in a tone that, though perfectly courteous, even respectful, was also absolutely and unmistakably firm:

'I am sorry, sir, but I can't at all agree with you. I think it would be the greatest mistake to hold such a meeting, and nothing would induce me to take part in it. I entirely disagree with the view you evidently take. It seems to me the reverse of helpful.'

Her amazement grew, yet amazement was almost lost in admiration of his courage. To refuse Sir Michael point-blank,

and in a tone unyieldingly firm and suggesting disapproval, even rebuke! Sir Michael evidently had difficulty in taking in what he heard.

'I don't understand. You don't mean... that you agree with him? I don't understand.' He seemed at a loss for words, a thing with him quite unprecedented.

Yet Harold remained entirely calm.

'No, probably not. As to agreeing with him, I think it unlikely. I have never agreed with him on anything. But I agree still less with persecution. If the morale of people at home is as shaky as you seem to think, we've lost the war and more — and it's no use bothering. But I don't believe it for a moment.'

Sir Michael, pale with anger and astonishment, literally seemed to have no words.

'And Stephen is a friend of mine. I couldn't contemplate stabbing him in the back. I don't know what his views really are — but whatever they are... If all he is saying is that we should make peace at the first possible moment — there isn't a man in France who doesn't think so too.'

There was a moment's silence.

'I'm afraid you may be right, there,' Sir Anselm threw in gravely.

Lady Henshaw interposed. 'Oh, Anselm, how can you say such a thing? They're splendid — nothing would make them give in.'

'You astonish me,' Sir Michael resumed at last. 'Astonish, indeed, is a mild word for what I feel. Personal loyalty is good: I respect your sense of what is due to friendship. But in a case like this... when a father feels a higher duty... Well: I say no more.'

His collapse amazed Jean. It was a tribute to something in Harold, of course: his entire immovability, inaccessibility.

'I suppose you are going back soon?' said Sir Michael coldly. It was a dismissal. She rose to take leave.

'Oh, yes. In four days.'

'Oh, in that case we probably couldn't get the thing going soon enough to have you.'

Harold held his eye. 'Let it be clearly understood, however, that my name is not to be used in any way: otherwise I shall feel obliged to write you a letter to be read expressing my entire dissent from your proceedings.'

'You've killed that,' said Jean, when they were on the road again. 'They won't risk it now.'

'Yes,' said Harold grimly. 'He's lost his chance of playing the modern Brutus.'

His tone was even more expressive than his words.

'Harold — you don't think he was enjoying it?'

'Of course he was. Those old men who can't suffer themselves are full of the lust of cruelty. I hope I hurt him. Those people are ghoulish. That woman, fluttering about with her hospital and her music room — and that solemn ass from the Ministry, behaving as if the whole burden were on his shoulders. Except that Sir Michael has to be visibly bearing still more — all the moral values. It makes one's mind whirl. I don't know where I am.'

His face was so dark that Jean felt a shudder run through her.

'But you don't agree with Stephen? Now?'

'I don't know what Stephen thinks. He generally leaves out most of the facts when he argues. I expect if I met him I should disagree violently. But to be afraid of what he says — it's humiliating. If our case is as bad as that... Do they want the war to go on for ever, just to give them something to feel? A chance of being "splendid"? For that's what it comes to. It makes me perfectly sick. I don't wonder

Stephen goes off the deep end if he has to live among these people.'

Jean laid a hand over his.

'Harold — you don't tell me anything. Is it too awful?'

For a moment his eyes met hers.

'I can't. Yes. It is. Too awful. That's all there is to say.'

'And I can't help you?'

His face was averted now: his eyes on the road.

'No. No one can. It doesn't join on.'

III

HAROLD went back to France in the first days of January, 1916, and did not come home again on leave till the following January. Between the two deep channels cut into her mind by those two leaves of his was a stretch of time that seemed in retrospect to hold nothing but the slow drip-drip of pain, apprehension, dread; nothing in any drop that fell to distinguish it, nothing to record, nothing to complain of; yet each, as in the Chinese torture, more painful than the last, and the result of their cumulative weight a wound that gaped and bled. She could not have believed it possible to go on suffering so continuously. But her experience was common; there was no distinction in it; its pattern was repeated wherever she looked. When she went, as she did often, to see Zillpah Dalton, she could not think of anything to say to her, for there was nothing to say. Harold was in danger; Jimmy was training for danger, every hour. Idle to pretend to have any comfort to give. As the days added up to weeks and the weeks to months, as winter passed slowly into spring, spring into summer, summer into autumn, and autumn into winter again, and the war still went on, Harold was still in France, more men — men she knew, as well as thousands she didn't — were killed or maimed, and there seemed no end to it, her

own pain, repeated on every side, became part of a universal pattern, and she felt they had all fallen into Hell together, and there was no past and no future for any of them. War had submerged life: other activities than those dedicated to it had ceased.

The mornings were the worst. She woke to an instantly gripping fear. Leaping out of bed, she went to the door, shut her eyes as she felt for the letters lying on the mat: gasped with a sense of uneasy respite when there was no envelope from the War Office among them. She had been with Agnes Lorbeer in London when her letter came and had seen her collapse in hysteria: Agnes, who had pretended not to care for Arthur, Agnes whom she had condemned as unfeeling because she danced every night. Then, that passed, there was the moment of opening the newspaper and looking at the casualty list. Except that, the columns meant nothing; she had long ceased to try to follow the 'progress of hostilities'; and the cheery speeches of statesmen made her feel sick. This was general: this was what she shared with everybody. In front of this, sometimes made worse by it, sometimes blotting it out, was her own special little corner of fear: the sense deposited by the disappointments of Harold's leave, that he was somehow slipping away from her, that he did not want that part of her which was most truly her. He had wanted her merely as woman: as pillow for an aching head. From sharing, from understanding, from any contact with his mind, he had shut her out. For her mind he had no use. He would have liked her better without one.

This impression his letters deepened. She had hoped, desperately, that, when he left her, he might manage to write — all the things he had not said. But he did not. On the contrary, she got only a dry chronicle of his journey. 'Found everything here as usual. We move up to-morrow and I may

not be able to write for a day or two. But don't worry.' That last phrase made her rage. Really, he need not treat her like a baby. He went on treating her like a baby: and bit by bit, her letters grew as empty as his; she became incapable of writing him a real letter. How could she? He did not want to know her thoughts, and there was nothing else to tell him. Before he came home, this barrier had not existed: but each time she sat down, pen in hand, now, it rose, impassable. To remind herself of where he was writing from, and what his life was like, was powerless to enable her to surmount it, because he himself had raised it between them, and to respect his clear wishes seemed, at the end of each argument with herself, the least that she could do.

Meantime, the routine of her own existence went on, day after day, with drab and unvarying monotony. At nine, wet or fine, she left the house on her bicycle. At least there had been no War Office letter: another 'Times' casualty list had spared her. That was something: she was luckier than many. So she told herself as she pedalled along — and then her mind went round and round again over the old maze. Why was Harold like this? How could she reach him? Was it going on for ever? Was it 'only the war' or had he fallen out of love for her and into love for someone else? Shameful even to think of such a thing: she rejected the thought, but it recurred. By nine-twenty she was at The Pyes, and there she remained till six if there was no special rush; till any hour if there was. If she got away at six there was tea at home: Mr. Claviger, drinking again heavily, sometimes loudly talkative about the mismanagement of the war, more often dead silent; Mrs. Claviger plunged in melancholy; Cassie full of stories she had heard out shopping, tales of atrocities, of exploits, the tittle-tattle of the war correspondents. She had taken to reading the papers and retailed their contents

mechanically. Sometimes Mrs. Claviger would say: 'Have you heard from Harold? Is he all right?' But she did not listen to the answer. She was convinced he was going to be killed. Mention of Harold merely led her mind to George: she would begin to cry softly — about George. Sometimes she got home only in time to drop into bed. What was there in such a day to make a letter out of? Lots — if only she could have talked to Harold as she used to do. But now there was nothing to say. She could not even say, 'I am counting the days till your leave' — for her thoughts of his leave were shot with terrified questioning. Nothing but the ending of the war could save them: and in 1916 there was no sign of that: less, as the months wore on. And every day, every hour — except in the hours of a rush of work at the hospital — terror hung over her: terror lest the post should bring the intelligence that annihilated everything. For Harold might be killed before the war ended. One said to one's self, 'I can't bear it' — but one had to. And bearing it was the whole content of the days.

Then, suddenly, a day had come when she went mad. It was a Sunday morning, and when she woke she realized that something had happened. The sun was pouring in on her as she lay in bed, the air that came in through the open window was caressingly soft to her cheek, and she could see great stretches of lovely blueness in the sky; hear a multitudinous twittering of birds, see, outside, the hedges touched with green. She rode right past The Pyes, down the slope on the other side. She did not stay to argue with herself; her feet settled. She was going to play truant. Defences — the fact that this was certainly a slack day, exceptionally so; that, at the moment, the hospital was over-staffed; that it would be good for the new girl whom she had drafted in to have to stand on her own feet, clear of her protecting wing — came

after the fact. They would do; they held; but it was not till she was two or three miles beyond The Pyes, irretrievably committed to abandonment of duty, that any of them occurred to her. And then they only floated in and out of a mind that gave none of them, or any of her habitual thoughts, any lodgement. With a turn as miraculous as any transformation scene in the pantomime, Jean Claviger had reverted to Jean Farquhar: a creature all eyes and ears for the magic of the country, with no past, no future, nothing but a sense of the beauty of the present so acute that her whole being was music in response to it. It was one of those spring mornings that the northerner feels can only occur in the north. The air had the electric clarity of melting frost, a crystalline quality that thrilled through veins and nerves; the blue and white of the sky — a high sky, with great racing clouds, through which the sun rode rejoicing — was dazzling; the whole landscape glowed with a shy, secret colour, that seemed to come out gradually as if for one's self alone. At The Pyes one was at the last outpost of industrialism. South of it, across the second ridge, factory towns extended in an unbroken series for miles; cobbles paved the many miles to Manchester. But at The Pyes the eye began to realize what Lancashire had been before cotton claimed it; and, out here, the country had no knowledge of smoke or steam. Deep rivers, thick woods, etched still in brown and white in their bodies, but fringed with a delicate hair of lovely green; great stretches of moorland grass; ahead, the ramparts of the Pennines. As she swung onto the rough and stony road that led up through the Trough of Boland, she recalled that she had last been here on August Bank Holiday, 1914. After a wonderful day she and Harold had stood together looking down at the sunset over Morecambe Bay in a silence wholly peaceful, of complete mutual comprehension. A soft grey

mist had lain over the nearer fields: she had noticed how the scarlet poppies here and there were picked out by the sun's long rays. She repressed the recollection. At the little farmhouse, halfway up, she collected bread and cheese, and then pushed on again. She knew a spot where a group of rowans overhung a deep pool, where there might be primroses or violets. For that she meant to make. She pushed on. It was hard work up some of the gradients: the surface was worse even than she had remembered it; but the effort pleased her and the sun on her back was good. At last, hot, breathless, and happy, she reached the point at which she planned to leave her bicycle and turn up the bed of the stream that there broke through the tangled grass and dry heather of the moor. She dismounted; then stood stock-still. To her amazement, a voice hailed her: a voice she knew but could not immediately place. She looked about — saw no one. Then, a patch of colour detached itself: a man in tweeds stood up from among the dry heather by the side of the stream; and the voice also defined itself. It was Stephen Henshaw. With long strides he was down on the road beside her.

'I'm as much surprised as you can be...'

'Oh, no. I didn't know you were in Bluehills.'

A flash of annoyance crossed his face. Then he smiled:

'Yes. I came yesterday. I have been addressing my constituents — telling them some things they didn't like. There was a fearful shindy at one point — eggs even: but luckily my voice can hold almost anything down — practice helps there; and I made them listen. I don't think it did them much good, not the vocal ones anyhow, but it did me, lots. But don't let's talk about that. Let's give the war a day off, eh? You look as if you'd had enough of it or something... and I certainly have.'

Stephen, in tweeds, looked different. She had never seen

him in the country and found it hard, even now that she did, to adjust him to it. Of course he had come by car; what business had he in the Trough of Boland? It belonged to her and Harold. And his account of the meeting revived painful memories of that day at The Pyes when Harold had come to life. Stephen's part in it had seemed to her cheap at the time — men who stayed at home were not entitled to undermine the courage of those who had to fight; an obscure resentment against him, smouldering in her mind ever since the argument on the day of the recruiting meeting, had broken out anew after that afternoon and now flamed up. She disliked him and the associations he brought with him. His cheerful self-esteem offended her — she began to think his mother was right. Something of what was passing in her mind perhaps reached him — he was infernally quick at such things. But he let it be. Probably he knew that, out there, her annoyance could not persist; and believed that he could, with the assistance of the weather and the place, make her forget that she disliked him.

He was right. She soon found that he shared with Harold — perhaps it was the bond between them — the power of full enjoyment of the given occasion, of being entirely in it and nowhere else. He came down and helped her to bestow her bicycle inside his car; inquired into her food provision; explained his own; at once agreed that her place for lunch might be better than one he had found.

'This is your place, I know; I feel you own it in a way I don't. I'm a mere interloper; you do the honours.'

He showed such unfeigned appreciation of the scene (not, thank Heaven, in words, but in the glance round of his eyes, the eager distension of nostrils sniffing the air) that she put aside the grudging resentfulness of his presence that had made her at first determine to keep her pool a secret, and led him to the spot.

He merely nodded his appreciation — but she could see that it was real. Why, indeed, should she doubt it? He had come out here, where one never met anyone from Bluehills: and, being here, took it as he should: said no words about it, though his ugly, expressive face wore a look that showed he felt it. Indeed, a face so expressive one might learn not to see as ugly; perhaps only ugly faces could be so expressive.

They ate their lunch; he made a fire; he had a can with him; they boiled water and he produced coffee. Her eyes had to sparkle.

'Go up ten!' she cried, letting her hostility go. 'One for tea, ten for coffee!'

He grinned. 'Coffee's a real bond... I could never care for anyone who preferred tea. It's what prevents me from being a real patriot, I believe — the English breakfast. And yet a country that has the vitality to start the day on tea and bacon — there's something invincible about it. We shall smash the frame of things in the process — but beaten? No, we can't be beaten. We ought to be... but we can't.'

'How do you mean — ought to be?'

'Why, because our position is indefensible. Oh, yes: I'm serious. Germany — yes: abominable but consistent; France the same: shameless intention to win back Alsace at the first chance. But we — neither one thing nor the other. This sickening apparatus of hypocrisy: war for peace's sake —— Oh, no: it won't do. Secret treaties, lies to our own people before and since. But you don't want to talk about all this.'

His bright eyes searched her face.

'I don't,' she said shortly.

'Afraid?' he asked instantly.

She flushed angrily.

'No,' he took her up at once. 'Don't be angry. I mean,

don't let it stop at that. You *are* afraid. That's wrong. Wrong for you, I mean. Some people must be left at that. They can't think. But you can. And if you don't, or won't, you get a block in your mind that hurts right through and poisons.'

She started involuntarily as he said this. But it was only one of his generalizations.

'That's the horror of horrors,' he went on. 'That's why it's all so awful. There's a mass of suffering and loss and degradation that happens automatically as a result of war — what Harold and the others have to endure out there. But there's an even worse form of that, which isn't necessary, though it requires a frightful effort to resist it. Torture may break the body: it need not subdue the mind. You needn't be like my father, who says: Evil, be thou my good. You must have felt the taint in him, by now? Yes: I see you have. You see, his idea that suffering is good and necessary is utterly dishonest. It leads straight to death. You know it. Don't you feel, in the bottom of your heart (not your mind: your mind is out of action, and for some shameful reason you're proud of that) that Harold is going to be killed?'

Jean stared away from him into the pool: so still, although it received the foaming, turning tide of the waterfall. His words hit her like stones: but, up to his last, the stones had no edge. But when he said 'Harold is going to be killed,' the edge broke against her: she felt as though she were bleeding; fancied she saw blood, dropping into the water, discolouring that white blur on the dark surface which was Harold's face. He went on, remorseless:

'You accept that; you believe that; and you let your mind go. But, probably, he isn't. Only maimed and deteriorated.'

'What do you mean?'

Stephen shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, anything you like.

Do you suppose he is not like the rest of us? Apart from anything else. Shut men up for months away from women... Compel them to be cruel in the whole direction of their thoughts. What are they there for? To kill. They get used to it. Think what that means.' He had laid a hand over hers in his earnestness. She shook it off. He flushed darkly, but she had no eyes for him. 'Do you suppose he is not like the rest?'

'You've no right to talk like this —— You safe at home, and they...'

He leaped on it instantly:

'Safe at home — yes. Hasn't that its obligations? Just to be numb — is that all we ought to do? *They* can't think. Ought not we to? Ought not you to? It's you I'm interested in at the moment. You can think. You must. It's the least you can do. It's your job. What are you doing, as a matter of fact? Housemaid's work in my mother's wretched hospital. Mere drug-taking. Like Esther at her canteen. Esther's a fool: it's the best she can do. But you...'

Jean's head whirled. Stephen shocked her. His reference to Esther seemed to her in horrible taste; indecent. But, beneath the confusion there was something else. Was he right? Was her effort to be the numb thing Harold seemed to want really a mere piece of cowardice and disloyalty on her part? Ought she to pull her mind back into action? Was she forgetting the good citizen altogether? She was: and only a good citizen could be a good wife to Harold. Stephen was telling her so, now, in set terms.

'There are rows of nice-looking young women who can do no more than look the part of hero's wife—or consoler. You can see them "consoling" hard in London: the oldest profession has got thousands of refined recruits. You can't imagine how sick one gets of them. They even find a pacifist

an adventure. Oh, I've nothing to complain of. There are people, little people, who are being persecuted and suffering hideously: but I don't claim to be one of them. But it's not about me I want to talk, but about you. You're a nice-looking young woman' — his voice softened, or seemed to soften, on the words — 'plus brains. And you're not using them. Are you? You're unhappy. That is not good enough.'

She looked at him. Vaguely she felt she ought to be angry. But she wasn't. Only baffled.

'What do you want me to do?'

'Think. Wake up. Open your eyes. Shake off this dust of dumb acceptance. It doesn't fit you in the least. Here's far the biggest event in our time. Understand it. It's the least you can do.'

He talked on — of White Books and Red Books: of pre-war policy and political intrigue. They sat smoking by the pool: the sun, shining strongly down, warmed them, brought out new scents to mingle with the flavour of the wood fire, new colours on the hillside opposite. Listening, putting in a word now and then, she found it hard to make any kind of case against his: had, indeed, when it came to it, nothing but a feeling to oppose to him — a feeling, too, that, when she tested it, was nothing more than the sense of being caught in something so huge that one must say it was right, for the alternative was a despairing helplessness from which there was no outcome. Yet this blind argument of hers broke down on facts. What did it amount to, Stephen asked her, in her case? She had to say it was good, else she could not bear it. But could she bear it? To that she could only reply:

'It's not fair, you know. You've turned up; you're saying this to me just at the moment when I find it unbearable.'

'Any moment you stopped to think, that would have happened. And I've not just turned up: our meeting this

morning was fated... I knew you would come. Though I didn't, honestly, know it would be you.'

She found his eyes full upon her, with an expression in them she could not fathom. He went on:

'Things — and people — turn up when one needs them most.'

'That fits me, perhaps, though I didn't know it.'

'That fits me even better — for I did.' His face was dark. He fell silent. She could if she liked look at him securely now, and try to make out that ambiguous countenance. But at it there was no pleasure in looking; her thoughts left it almost at once. Stephen as a person did not matter to her, he was no more than a lever by which she might pull herself out of the impotent slough in which she lay, in which she was no good to Harold, or herself, or anyone else. Her attention left him, and reverted to the puzzles he had set her mind. Yes, he had started it: now she would have to try to understand.

From that time on Stephen was a fact in her life; a strictly intellectual fact. He did what he had said he would do — he brought her mind into action again. During the rest of that first day, his conversation was impersonal: he rained facts upon her — facts which made her feel that she knew nothing of the history of Europe, or of her own country, nothing of the economic and social geography of the world she lived in. The easy simplifications of her early attitude to the war looked incredibly fatuous, against that background — but she was not then, nor for long after, prepared to accept Stephen's views: or so she thought. When they parted, he promised to send her books. He was as good as his word. He returned to London: summer and autumn passed and winter was far advanced before she saw him again; but during those months they carried on a regular correspondence, arising out

of her reading. Of him she thought as an invaluable and splendidly reliable office or reference library. It was his answers to her questions she was interested in, not the fact that he sent them. Now and then it occurred to her that her attitude to him was inhuman, but, with Stephen, so much more inhuman himself, what did that matter? Perhaps he had talked and looked, now and then, in the Trough, in the terms of incipient flirtation. That was only habit. Really, his human side, in so far as he had one, was in Esther Exton's keeping — a circumstance that spoke for itself. She could leave that. At a time when, on the human side, one was so perpetually lacerated, what a relief there was in this inhuman kind of intercourse: in being safe. Possibly, if vaguely, he was potentially interested in her; she not in him. He stimulated her mind, interested her, helped her to keep going — for Harold. It had puzzled her before why Harold liked him. It puzzled her still, since, interest notwithstanding, she was by no means sure of her own liking. Somewhere, indeed, unexamined, a faint infusion of uneasy curiosity, almost of fear, mingled in her thought of Stephen. It rarely raised its head, however. Her interest was elsewhere. This time, she was going resolutely to prepare herself for Harold's leave, and when it came, was going to be active, not passive. She was not going, stupidly, to wait for him to talk to her: she would talk herself.

That leave, hoped for throughout November and December, did not actually occur till January, 1917. When the time at last drew near, he wrote suggesting its being spent in London. There were reasons — things he must do, people at the War Office he must see, and so on; he could go to Bluehills for a day to see his mother. But her heart leaped to a reason he did not mention: he wanted to have her to himself. Of course, he did not say so; there was no phrase in this or

any other letter that suggested it; his letters, indeed, were perfectly compatible with the fear that had almost ceased to haunt her that he had fallen out of love with her and into love with someone else. Almost, but not quite. She believed that the reason he had seemed remote last time was different, and that she now understood it. Even if she were wrong, and there was 'someone else,' she was much more likely to be in London than in Bluehills. 'Do you suppose he is not like the rest?' Stephen's phrase rose up threateningly, again and again.

She released herself from hospital; spent the week before her departure for London between the piano and her clothes; she had her hair waved, her hands manicured; remodelled her evening dresses, so long unworn — the black lace she preferred and the lemon yellow that Harold had liked; and practised the pieces he had used to ask her to play. She was so busy preparing for him that she did not write to Stephen. She supposed she should see him, but the question did not interest her much. She was setting out on the adventure of reconquering Harold: that was what the wheels of the train sang to her as they carried her towards London.

The first person she met in London was Muriel Payne: Muriel, transformed into a fascinating boy-girl in chauffeur's uniform, was sitting at the wheel of a big car in the Euston yard, and hailed her in her vibrant, cheery voice.

'Hallo, Jean! How amusing to see you, of all people! And prettier than ever: whatever else is wrong with this old war, it's a complexion tonic. You look splendid. After all, things happen nowadays — that makes up for a lot, doesn't it? Yes, I'm a chauffeur now. Brown went out in '15. Reggie? Oh, he's all right: busier than ever. Neil seems to have missed his train. He went up to Crewe to cope with some of those awful munition workers — oh, frightful trouble there:

of course it's being kept dark — and I suppose he's found them more unreasonable than he expected. The working classes don't seem to realize there's a war. Let me give you a lift — you may wait ages for a taxi. That's right: hop in beside me — sling your bag inside. No, it's all right. I'm sure Neil isn't here — he's the first man out, always.'

Jean's mind whirled, as Muriel ran on. 'Neil,' 'Neil' — who was he? She did not like to ask questions, though Muriel no doubt would have liked her to. It was only six months ago that Jim Carthew was blown up, and when she had got Harold's letter — Jim had been his company commander: he had succeeded him — it was of Muriel she had thought — at once.

Muriel was a good driver and negotiated the huge car with skill. Held up for minutes by a traffic block, she began talking again.

'What have you been doing all this time? Have you been in France?'

'No. Only hospital at home.'

'Nursing is dull, I think. If you want to go on with it, though, go to France — you get much more of the real thing. I was out there for a bit, driving: frightfully absorbing. Though, in a way, you're more on the springs of things here: and, Neil being in the inner circle, I hear a lot. More than is good for my bumps of veneration — which are not very large, anyhow. Still, it's amusing.' She laughed — she had a very charming laugh. 'How's Harold? He still exists, doesn't he?'

'Oh, yes. I'm expecting him to-night.'

'Well, give him my greetings and tell him to ring up some morning — earlyish. Reggie'd like to see him, but he isn't often at home. Couldn't we lunch one day — or dine and dance somewhere?'

Jean had twenty-four hours of London before Harold came. She did not, this time, go to the station: he had told her not to, and it had been a mistake the time before. He arrived just in time for dinner and they went straight into the restaurant at the hotel. It seemed to her that he hardly looked at her, and for her everything ran together in a dancing pattern of hot colours, lights, moving figures against a whirling background of jazzy noise. The hotel was a new one: rose and gold, with clustered chandeliers casting down a ruddy light on the huge dining-room, whose little tables were crowded round the fringes of a cleared parquet space where people danced to the strains of an orchestra of young women in barbaric costumes half concealed in a sham tropical palm grove lit by multi-coloured twinkling lights. The noise, the incessant movement, the heat of the atmosphere, heavy with cigar smoke and heady perfumes, made her head and eyes ache. They sat opposite each other through the long pauses between the courses — the service was elegant but dreadfully slow — and had nothing to say. There was Harold — there, and yet not there. The oppression that had weighed on her during the first hours of his first leave seized her again the moment her eyes encountered the dead glacial stare of his; but it was worse, far worse, than before. It operated instantly — even in the lounge. What was it? He looked physically well. She could see women all over the room glancing at him as they came in, and feel their eyes returning to him, later. He was handsome: the beauty of his face hurt her, atrociously, for she was the one woman in the room who could not look at him for more than a furtive instant. If she did, something rose in her throat and choked her, so that she could not speak. There had been so many things she wanted to say to him: what were they? They had gone. There was nothing. What had they used to talk

about? She could not remember. He asked her no questions. He made a few perfunctory inquiries about his mother and sister (to which he knew the answers: what else had there been to put in letters?): but about herself asked nothing. Muriel Payne had told her she was looking pretty; her glass had been reassuring — she really was in her best looks; but there was no confirmation of that in his blank eyes. She had intended to be gay and vivacious; had determined to shut disloyal thoughts completely out; to do her part, to help him to forget France; he made any of that impossible. At last, in desperation, after ever so many promising starts had failed dismally, she tried to rouse him by recounting her meeting with Stephen Henshaw, and how, since, she had been studying the origins of the war and trying to clear her mind about responsibility. Here, her own interest being real, she did, she thought, talk interestingly, and gave him a clear and cogent statement. Nothing in return, but Harold's devastating 'Yes?' He was not going to discuss or argue; he gave no gleam of light as to where his mind was on this; he looked as though it neither concerned nor interested him in the least: nor she either. At the end, all he said was:

'We must get hold of Stephen.'

'Have you seen him ever?'

'Only in Paris.'

'In Paris? Have you been in Paris?'

'Yes. A couple of months ago. I ran across Stephen there.'

'You never told me you were in Paris.'

'Didn't I? Well — there was nothing to tell. Paris is London — only more so.' He looked about the restaurant with bleak and hostile eyes. 'This. Only more so. Eat and drink — for to-morrow ye die.'

'Why aren't we like that?'

'Well — aren't we?'

'About dying — perhaps. But you left out "Be merry." *They* are merry.'

Harold stared at his plate. He looked at that moment suddenly like Cassie — vacant, morose, but also abandoned of God. That look even on Cassie's face Jean found intolerable: to see it on Harold's, obliterating his native sunshine, was hideous. But Paris — what had he been doing in Paris?

'Stephen was merry,' he suddenly resumed, aware, as if by some uncanny sympathy, of where she was getting, and determined to head her off. 'He's enjoying himself. The cynic justified. We must get hold of him. He fits into... this... But you look as though you didn't want him?'

He had looked at her then: she answered wildly, at random.

'Oh, I don't mind. He interests me. But there's something rather terrible about him — he thinks evil is more real than good, I feel.'

'Well, isn't it? Now?'

'Oh, no, Harold. It can't be.'

'Why not?'

She had no answer, nor could she explain to him or to herself why she suddenly felt she did not want Stephen. She liked his letters: they helped her; they kept her mind busy. But that seemed irrelevant now. What did it matter — so the mere act of sitting opposite Harold made her feel — whether the war was right or wrong, justified or unjustified, when it was here and one had to bear it? The less one thought the better. The dancing people were right. That was what she and Harold had better be doing. If he would seize her in his arms and whirl her round and round into insensibility of everything but his arms round her, his hot breath on her face. Even if he seized her as he had done last

time. Then, she had not understood, had resisted. She would not resist now... But he was saying:

'Yes. We must get hold of Stephen.'

Why was Stephen the only subject on which he could talk? Why did he want him? Was he trying to get rid of her, protect himself against her, through Stephen?

This thought came back with fresh force when Stephen did appear — all the force that could be given it by Harold's exclusion of her. That was not a possibility any longer: it was a definite, irrefutable fact. In the night, her mind, unable to hold to any one thought in relation to him, had swung from anger to pity. She had remembered France — the trenches — Jim Carthew, dearest of his friends; his writing to her that he himself was captain by right of death now Jim had gone; and the awful isolation she had guessed at when she thought of him without Jim; and on that had suddenly thrown herself at him. Literally. And he had rebuffed her. When she tried to kiss him, he withdrew: he lay by her side, rigid and immobile as any corpse, while she burned with furious humiliation. She had not wanted him — had he known that? She had been afraid of him: yet pity had driven down fear and something stronger than herself had forced her to approach, to put her arms round him, to strive by every tender means she had ever known to stir his passion in response. And she had failed. All she met was numb aversion. He turned away: quite gently but absolutely firmly he put her aside. He behaved as though she were not there. He was not asleep: she doubted whether he had slept at all any more than she had. He did not look like it. Something in the drawn pallor of his face forced her most instant fear to her lips.

'Harold: tell me one thing. You haven't found someone else you care for?'

As she spoke, it sounded idiotic: her heart thumped in her throat as he looked at her on that, for a minute, with an expression she could not fathom. Then, suddenly, he laughed. His laugh was dreadful. It died. There was a silence. He looked away. When his voice came at last, it seemed to reach her over a great distance: it was low, queerly muted, gentle:

'Poor little Jean! Is that all you know about it?'

A flush of bitter shame rose in her cheeks; she had a feeling of childishness: of talking to someone who had passed into a mode of existence beyond her imagination's range. She was answered: and ashamed.

'Forgive me, Harold... I'm so in the dark. And you won't tell me anything.'

'Won't!' He groaned. 'I can't. What would be the use?'

'I might understand.'

'Would that stop it? Would that bring Jim Carthew back? Would it join up the pieces that once were Arthur Lorbeer? Would it save Ned Fowkes from drinking himself to death? Jim... you knew him: well, I tell you he was glad when that shell finished him; and I was glad for him. Yes, glad. Understanding — this chatter about understanding makes me sick. There's nothing to understand or explain. It's simple... as simple as hell. And as dull. Understand — there's no sense in understanding. It wants stopping, not understanding.'

'But if you'd talk to me...'

'Talk?' he interrupted, almost fiercely. 'What's the sense in talking? Besides — I can't. You can't tell the living what death is like.'

'But,' she cried desperately, 'need it divide us like this? Need you go right away from me? You don't know how you hurt me. Harold, what is it? There must be something.

Do tell me. I can bear anything if only you'd speak. But this silence: it's awful.'

'Silence? You call it silence? If you could only hear the noise that never stops for one moment! — Silence!'

Yes: now, she *knew* what he meant: then, she had not understood. Must one always understand too late? Then, she had gone on, worrying him with her idiotic questions, till he got angry and hurt her. And, worst turn of any, she began to hate him, he hurt her so much. Being sorry for him did not make him hurt her less, but more. Impossible, whatever anyone said, not to feel one's own pain more than someone else's: it was one's own, one really felt, in theirs. She might, she did, remind herself that it was the degree to which he suffered that made him hurt her, but her own hurt blocked her mind, made it ache so that there was no room in it for his.

Stephen made everything worse, because he made it definite. His cynicism was alert, active, vital, and it and he seemed to have found their natural, expressive atmosphere.

'Well,' he said gaily, in his harsh, light, brittle voice, as he sat down to dinner with them on the next evening, 'and how do you like the human race *au naturel?* with the mask off and the clothes going? You've often said, Harold, that goodness was positive in man, cruelty only a stage. What about it now?' He glanced about the room with a malicious grin. 'Can you deny that London is enjoying the war?'

'If you call this enjoyment,' said Jean. Stephen looked at her.

'They do. And there's no denying that the whole thing is keyed up. There's a bit of drama for everyone.' His eyes were on Harold now. 'Things in life that are greater than life, as my father puts it.'

'Yes? What are they?'

'Ah — you've got me there — you must ask him. You're supposed to know. Not me. I can't see them. I've got a literal mind. When a man's dead, well, he's dead and that's that, for me. Not for my father. And nations have discovered souls, you know, immortal souls, which live, though their human tenements are dead. Belgium — glorious Belgium — Serbia, too, going the same way. And Russia — we're all discovering the soul of Russia. America hasn't found it yet. But no doubt it will. This mass-sacrifice emotion is hard to resist — Wilson is an idealist: he'll go to it, in the end.'

'I'm surprised that you are left at large,' said Harold drily.

Stephen laughed. 'Oh, I'm a Member of Parliament, thanks in part to you, I gather. Of course there are plenty of people who'd like to see me roasted publicly. My post-bag would amuse you: "Mothers of sons" write to me, anonymously. Why are the mothers of daughters never heard of, Jean? And, in Bluehills, they'd mob me if they got the chance. I had several coats spoiled by eggs when I was last there, nine months ago. But Bluehills is young and simple: London, old and sophisticated, full of politicians with their tongues in their cheeks and ladies who are having the time of their lives — a fresh lover every night. The gladiators are on exhibition here, and there are almost too many of them. Soldiers are common now: I'm more popular at parties than you'd be, Harold. They like to hear me bait them.'

'And I've got nothing to say. True. Seriously, though, Stephen, does anybody here want to stop it?'

'Lord, no. I've got a Peace Society — you'd think from the papers we were a dangerous body — so active and seditious. But if they didn't advertise us, we'd simply be invisible.'

'I suppose,' said Jean, 'they *can't* see, now. The thing's so big: it's fallen on top of us like a great stifling pillow.'

'Yes,' said Stephen, 'It's partly that. But they like it — oh, yes, they do.'

'They don't in Bluehills,' she said stoutly.

'Don't they? I bet Clavigers are making money. The people who don't like it are in it and can't get out. Like you, Harold. The others enjoy it: it gives them a chance. Of course conscription wasn't popular with the conscripted, but their mouths are shut and the conscribers love it — sitting on tribunals and downing the uppish working class — it's jam for them. Look at that man — that fellow with the red tabs who has just come in. He was nobody three years ago: now he's a big bug in some Ministry or other — can't remember which — and a Major-General. Or that tall dark man in the Naval Reserve: all he ever has to do that's unpleasant is sit on a roof at night and talk big. And the women! Talk of the devil...'

From the dancing tangle, as it slowly moved by them, a figure detached itself — a figure in vivid but exiguous green and gold: gold hair and shoes and a wisp of emerald gauze round the middle. It was Esther Exton. She had seen Stephen, but it was to the others she spoke.

'My dears! How amusing! Harold — Jean, this is splendid. Two men in plain clothes: what a comfort — khaki's such an ugly background — clever of you to be in mufti, Harold. Frightfully well you look — amazing, isn't it, Jean, how France suits men? It's a rest from us, I suppose. Not that we poor things get our share of that: I've never had such a hectic time. I thought, in my ignorance, that I was going to be quiet and peaceful, but it's a season with no gaps. I shall sit down with you and pause for a minute or two —— Yes, a drink would be good.'

She looked at them, quickly, out of her bright, unseeing eyes.

'What an age it seems since we met!' She addressed herself to Harold. 'But this is better than that dreadful place you used to live in — what was its name? Isn't it? The man I was dancing with just now — I don't know his name — said that he lived in Oldham before the war. No wonder he was grateful to it! Just fancy living in Oldham! Of course he's never going back. He is in the War Office now. You needn't look scornful, Stephen: I know you despise us, but you aren't any better, really. Dance with me, Harold?'

Harold, to Jean's surprise, rose obediently.

'Restful person, Esther,' remarked Stephen drily. 'You never have to answer any of her questions — she's forgotten them herself and pattered on to something else. A happy temperament. Of course, when she thinks she's serious, she's the limit.'

'You *are* a cad.'

Stephen threw back his head and laughed.

'Oh, splendid! I've got it out of you. Now you'll feel better. And Esther can make eyes at Harold, in the hope of making me jealous! If you'd only make eyes at me in the hope of making Harold so! The trouble is that Esther will find herself caught. And you... I'm afraid not. Anyhow, you'd better have a dance with me now. We've never done it, have we? It will be nice for me, if not for you.'

Stephen danced well — but dancing with him meant nothing. Esther seemed to be laughing and talking with Harold; he did not freeze her — nothing could freeze Esther. She chattered on when they were again sitting down together, but Jean hardly heard. Every nerve was tense: waiting for Harold to suggest dancing with her. Why didn't he? He didn't. She danced again with Stephen.

She danced a good deal with Stephen in the days that followed, and Esther a good deal with Harold. Once or twice, she did dance with Harold, but it was her doing, not his. And once she caught an expression in his eyes, as he held her, that cleft her heart. After that she did not try to make him dance with her again. Then, on a blinding instant, she knew that he did not dance with her because she still did something to him, waked something in him, that Esther could not touch. She could give him no joy, now; but she could still rouse something he wanted dead. She saw this, for a moment; then it vanished into the confused hot darkness of her own misery, and was lost.

Stephen and Esther seemed to go everywhere with them — to idiotic plays and shows of various kinds, dance clubs, and restaurants; and the division was Harold and Esther, she and Stephen. And this was Harold's doing. Did that mean that he did not care for her any more? At times she thought he hated her; if he did, if he felt any of the bitterness that smouldered in her, he must still care. All she did know was that somehow, for some reason, she hurt him, and he avoided her. Esther protected him — from her. In herself she did not matter; she was nothing. That, precisely, was why Harold had a use for her. But his use of Esther left Jean to Stephen. She, after all, had to play her part, and what part was there for her to play save to flirt with Stephen?

Endlessly thinking about it was fatuous; yet, how could she stop? Shamelessly she flirted with Stephen; it had to be shameless to make Harold notice it. Even so, she was not sure that he did notice it. And if he did, what then? In whichever direction her mind turned, it seemed to beat against walls, like a wasp imprisoned in a glass. She tried to sting the walls — how silly! but what was she to do?

The scene was always crowded; always noisy; there seemed to be an incessant band playing and a perpetual sense of hurry, somehow combined with that of perpetual waiting. One lived as if on a station platform; the train did not come, one waited, and there was at once too much time and too little: too little for anything that mattered, too much for what one was doing at the time. People dashed in and out — appeared and vanished. Vanishing was literal: men one saw on Monday were in Thursday's casualty list. Because this dark possibility always hung before them, a tacit understanding ruled that the war was not mentioned: never mentioned seriously, and never in terms of pain. There was nothing to be said about it: by January, 1917, it had become an institution. The night Gerard Campbell, a young cousin of Stephen's, broke this rule, was exceptional. Perhaps that was why Gerard Campbell stood out so sharp in her recollection: why, she could hear his cracked voice now, crying, 'I'm not going back.'

'Won't you be court-martialled or something?' asked Stephen.

'Oh, no. Lunatic asylum more likely: another kind, that is.'

Gerard was real. She could see Harold looking at him askance, as though he felt him a brother, but a brother whom he must not recognize by any outward sign. He said nothing. How little he ever said, now! His silence was the most positive thing about him: it stood out in her mind as the one steady fact in the blurred kaleidoscope of the days.

Everything comes to an end — good or bad. Harold's second leave came to an end. As that end approached, as, suddenly, the last day, the last afternoon, the last half hour, was there, she was overpowered by almost frenzied despair, and would have given anything to stay the hands of the

clock. For then it swept down over her how the time had been wasted, destroyed, shortened, made a horror of, by her. She had done everything she ought not to have done, everything she despised. She had tortured Harold by talk: how loathsome to him her chatter about origins and treaties, negotiations and responsibility! how childishly irrelevant! She had tortured him by flirting with Stephen; or, if she had not, there was no merit, for her, in his immunity: she had intended to do so. Not content with that, she had added worry and irritation by saying that she proposed to remain in London: told him she could not bear Bluehills any more. She flushed now, as she remembered that; how cheap for her to say, to him, that she could not bear it! How ridiculous to try to explain to him that the thing that had finally made her feel she could not bear it was a letter from Cassie telling her that Tamar, her kitten, was dead. It had been the last straw that made Claviger House seem impossible: but really, of course, it was not Claviger House or Bluehills she could not bear. It was herself. In London, she might escape from herself: escape from the horrible knowledge that Harold was nothing but a pain to her, that hour by hour of his leave she had not only said to herself she could not bear it: she had wished him back in France. When it was too late she was appalled.

To wish anyone back in France was murderous. Yet, honesty constrained the admission that when he was gone, when Stephen and she walked away down the platform together, the last of the train having disappeared behind them, her first sensation was relief. Pain remained; but it was not so wholly ugly a pain as that she had carried when he was there. Gone, she could think back through the new to the old Harold; present, the new Harold hurt her so that love was buried under soreness and resentment. Was that why

death was the only clean wound? She had shuddered as this thought came to her; in her own veins ran the subtle pervasive poison of war, which made death seem desirable. London was full of people who, more or less consciously, wore death as a decoration; felt initiate because they had lost a loved one, 'given' him, as they put it. When he was 'given' to death, he was theirs. Then they could, and often did, forget him and love someone else. So Muriel substituted Neil Jordan for poor Jim Carthew, and Esther — but to track down Esther's substitutions was a hopeless task. Perhaps, now that she was going to stay with her, she, too, would accept this outlook. Was she abandoning Harold altogether in going to Esther? Giving him over willingly to death?

This grim thought rose as she stood at the door of the railway carriage and, over it, her eyes desperately sought his. For a moment, sitting in that crowded carriage, packed with other officers and their impedimenta, he looked at her with eyes that saw: eyes that were dark with pity. Pity, from him, for her! Stephen (it was Harold's doing that he was there) intervened with some sarcastic comment on the paper he was reading, and the moment was gone. But it had been there. It was no dream: she had seen his eyes, not lightless, colourless, but dark; it had always been his dark eyes that loved her, the dark eyes that, till then, she had not seen throughout his leave. At Moragh she had thought his eyes were black. And now, in her extreme need, they were there: they pitied her. But when she looked again, his eyes were grey and cold, and pain almost obliterated recollection. Senseless to go on caring: it only exposed one to be hurt. He said nothing. The whistle blew. The train was gone.

'That's that,' said Stephen. Something in his tone vexed

her. He no doubt saw it: he saw most things; but he went on regardless: 'It is, you know. We can't do any more for him.'

On that she looked at him.

'What is it?' she said.

He shook his head.

'Could you talk to him, when I wasn't there? Oh, don't prevaricate.'

'In a way, yes. About unconnected things.'

'I can't. About anything.'

Stephen looked at her directly. 'No. I suppose not. He's terribly unhappy.'

'Oh, yes, I know. But what is it?'

'He's like a man who's committed a crime and can't confess. He suffers too much. We can't do anything for him. War, you know, is the final show-up of the salutary power of suffering. I've always known that suffering is a disease: it grows by what it feeds on. It makes people want to infect others — to inflict it on them, pass it on. Being proud of suffering — that's a deadly trap. Good people, when they suffer too much, go bad. That's if they accept it. If they refuse, like my father and mother, their minds go askew. They pretend the suffering isn't there.'

They were dining at the House of Commons — Stephen had swept her off with him, reminding her that one must eat after all and that he, at any rate, still enjoyed being seen with pretty ladies. The compliment did not touch her. She had long ago made terms with her own looks and rated them neither very high nor very low. It was not her looks that interested Stephen. For herself she was merely glad of the distraction of any company. And he represented 'company' at its highest pitch: it was no effort to be with him. Now he continued to talk of his parents, treating them with the same detached appraisal that he turned on Lloyd George and

Bonar Law; just as he talked of episodes in his own life with the same cynical frankness with which he exposed the underside of events presented in the press.

'You feel you understand it all?' she had asked him. She hadn't meant to be ironical, but he had taken it quite simply.

'Oh, no. It's largely irrational, and the irrational is always puzzling. But I am one of the few people to whom it's done no harm, because I faced my own irrational long ago and neither admire nor fear it. I knew — it didn't need a war to show me — that I have cruel and violent impulses in me: that other people's pain often gives me pleasure, but my own neither pleasure nor improvement. So the whole affair amuses me. Ah, that shocks you. But it's true. It's such a complete and perfect thing — the war: there's nothing it doesn't expose. People, nine tenths of them, who used to be mysterious, suddenly became transparent, as though they were under a huge Röntgen ray. The elaborate controls and safeguards and fig-leaves have gone: they are naked — and most of them ashamed.'

'And you're not?'

'No. If you understand, you aren't.'

Understanding! Stephen was always talking about that. To him it was the be-all and the end-all. There — only there — he joined on to her father. What was it, though, that made Stephen's understanding rather horrible, while Dr. Farquhar's had been beautiful? Because he understood so much, her father had been kind — as kind as Harold used to be. Because he understood so much, Stephen was hard, cruel, full of contempt, a scorner of the rules of conduct, manners, decency she had learned by example rather than by precept to value in her father. Stephen saw through everybody and everything; the more he saw, the poorer and

meaner did the world and the men and women in it become. He despised nearly everybody. His indifference to the opinion of others was grounded in sincere contempt. Its sincerity she always admired; its courage, sometimes. But he was as indifferent to criticism he deserved as to that which he did not. His intellectual arrogance was at times sublime; his personal complacency she often found quite odious. But he passed the time; yes: he passed the time.

IV

Once, when she was between fifteen and sixteen, Jean had been involved in a boating accident. A sudden squall, sweeping over the loch in white breakers, lifted her right up from her seat at the tiller of the heavy fishing tub, under the eyes of her father and Archie Durance, and it was only by a miracle (a miracle of human courage and quickness of wit on the part of Archie) that she had escaped drowning. She had been near enough to get then and recall now a telescopic vision of the course of her then short and uneventful life — in which what was strangest was its unlikeness to any picture she could have manufactured of the events it professed to recall. At fifteen she imagined herself in love with Archie, but Archie hardly appeared in her vision: it was dominated by her father. Often, since, this difference in values created by retrospect had struck her. It did so with peculiar force now, as she reached the months between Harold's return to France in January, 1917, and the fatal 2d of September. Looked at now, they seemed insignificant, empty: a mere gap in time between the foreknowledge of disaster and its accomplishment. Empty: yes, that, now, was the word she must use to describe them. The kindest word.

Even so, it was strange, for, at the time, they had seemed the very reverse: full, alive, coloured, more real than any

before. With a sensation that she was observing some other person, not herself, she heard her own voice saying, 'I am alive — really alive. This is life at last,' as she dashed to her committee in the morning, flew in a taxi to lunch or dine with Stephen at the House, flung out of sober working into filmy spangled garments to go to one of Esther's parties at night. Now, she saw herself with the same coldly contemptuous eyes she turned on Esther. Now, that hectic gaiety, that perpetual motion, that unending stream of talk, only brought back to mind a phrase of her father's, which Harold had taken on from Dr. Farquhar and often used, 'the crackling of thorns under a pot.' She had tried to be like Esther. Esther of course gave the note of the whole time, but she did not pretend, now, that she had not gone to live with her deliberately, and with full knowledge of what she was doing. Esther, she was well aware, regarded her as a timid little provincial mouse: cold in temperament and good, partly from cowardice, more from sheer absence of temptation.

On the first evening of her taking up quarters in her house, she had said to her, without any attempt at hiding the contemptuous pity she felt:

'I suppose you are pining for Harold?'

She assuredly was not pining for Claude, conveniently remote by that time in Saloniki. Jean had flushed under her tone, but looked her in the eye as she retorted:

'Indeed, I am not doing anything of the kind.'

As she did so she felt a glow of courageous independence. She could hold her end up, against Esther, with that statement loud between them. Esther was impressed, because it was the truth. She was not pining for Harold: she was not thinking of Harold. She refused to think of him. As she spoke, she slammed the door on him and, obedient to her will, he vanished.

Esther had put her head on one side — she was leaning on the mantelpiece, in her favourite attitude, admiring her fine arms and shoulders in the round mirror that hung above it, placed at an angle that enabled her to look far down into her own anatomy — and looked at her pensively.

'I don't know, you know, that I should blame you if you were. If he weren't your husband... There's something enigmatically attractive about Harold. Always has been. Even his saying so little sets one puzzling. So unlike most of the men one knows. Stephen, for instance: always explaining! The idea that men don't talk!'

Harold — Stephen. Jean saw what was in Esther's mind. It had her characteristic crude simplicity. An exchange: Stephen for Jean, Harold for her. At the moment it amused her, coldly. But what, now, seemed inexplicable was that she had, negatively and tacitly, accepted one half of it, and not so much as given a thought to the other. Living with Esther came to mean that she and Stephen were cast as partners always. She let this be, although she never, at bottom, ceased to realize that Esther neither had nor could let Stephen go, whatever she might say or do. That she talked of and at him in the most vitriolic terms was far less significant than the fact that of and at him she must always talk: that he remained the centre to which her thoughts swung back. No: on the relation between Esther and Stephen, Jean could not excuse herself on any plea of ignorance, nor, in general, of stupidity. She was, once and for all, not stupid. She knew Esther of old; she saw, quite well, what she was about. She knew, too, what was happening to herself. Far from doing anything to prevent the net from tightening round her feet, she wove it assiduously. She was not going to have Esther put her down as an up-country Puritan. That what Esther thought had ever, even for a

moment, been of importance to her seemed strange and rather dreadful now. But, then, she had tried to impress Esther and she had done it. Within a few weeks, Esther was treating her on an equality, as a person whose reactions would be not queer and Edwardian (for Esther the supreme adjective of contempt and derision), but identical with her own. In other words, for the time being, at any rate, she accepted Esther's standards and was subdued by them. When she strove to retrace the history of that process, it went back to something incredibly small.

Awaking on her first morning in Clarges Street, she found a maid depositing tea by her bedside; that same maid, after drawing the curtains to let in the brown light of a February day, proceeded to order and lay out her garments for her: a maid used to Esther's garments, whose eyes on her own she could hardly bear. Idiotic to mind: contemptible; yet she had minded, minded a great deal. As she watched the maid, she had suddenly felt inferior, incomplete, not quite a woman. Taking that sensation downstairs with her, and, later, out into the streets, she found it growing more and more potent. In the end, it was what dominated those months in London. She had soon after a day of almost frenzied enjoyment, such reckless shopping as she had never indulged in before; and hey, presto! the sense of inferiority was, as if by magic, replaced by one of heady superiority. At last she had left Bluehills behind: had shaken its growdy dust completely off.

It might be humiliating, but there it was. The thing that made the difference, that coloured and conditioned those months and her in them, was clothes. She might make a case for herself and the other women and say that by the winter of 1916–17 the war had got unbearable, and in London one felt it more than in Bluehills — so much more that

she and they had to invent a new technique of escape. It would sound convincing, and she could produce arguments on it, thoroughly specious and apparently valid. But it would not be true. The war, in London, was like a livid background, which showed up the dazzling colours of the turning ballet and set it spinning at a more rapid rate; by now, almost a stock background with which they were so familiar that it was bad taste to refer to it except in more or less jesting phrase, a light and semi-humorous terminology not confined to the women. Through Esther's house there passed a long series of officers on leave as well as red tabs in Government departments; and though the officers were more parsimonious in their reference to the war, the terms of that reference were the same as those of the civilians. Not one of them was within miles of Harold's state about it. His state, indeed, grew to seem to her so unique that a doubt as to his sanity crossed her mind. The others might have, tacitly, laid him to heart as a warning of what happened to one if one did think about it. They did not. They evaded it. They asked of London that it should be as far away from it as possible. And London obeyed.

As to the terms of that obedience, her mind now, harshly and in the cold light of retrospect playing over the past, admitted of no softening elisions. The place became a phallic temple. That was what the preoccupation with clothes meant. For Esther, for Muriel, for all the women, young, middle-aged, even elderly, of their group, clothes had no æsthetic significance. The argument that it was incumbent on women to provide relief, to give artistic quality to existence, to cover an aching heart with gold lace and bright jewels, was, at bottom, subterfuge. No one could live with Esther Exton and swallow that. Esther's clothes were a sex battery: life with her made Jean sex-conscious

as she had never been before. It was not merely that she began to devote time to her hands, her face, her hair: that she bought clothes and thought about them incessantly. She looked at herself and at other people in quite a new way. Her consciousness of her own appearance, rising up to the forefront of her mind, carried over irresistibly to a consciousness of what other people felt about it. There might seem nothing in buying two sets of crêpe de chine underclothing which cost more than she had been used to pay for a frock; but a habit of looking at what she did with the same eyes with which she looked at what other people did compelled her now to see that trifling action as the abandonment of any power to resist or criticize Esther and Esther's way of life. She had, on that, crossed over to her side. She could invent explanations: could see now that through those months she had been playing a wretched game of hide and seek — no, of hide, not seek; that her talk with Stephen about understanding covered a real refusal to see and understand; but there was the fact. She fell into a world of clothes: the world of silly, faithless, selfish philandering, the world of what Esther called love. And she had destroyed Stephen, Harold, herself, as a result.

'Stephen is falling in love with you,' Esther said, quite early on. Behind the lightness of her tone, Jean's ear caught the ring of something else and she looked up quickly.

'Oh, I don't mind,' Esther went on. 'But he is. I warn you, simply because Stephen is one of the queer people who are flighty when you take them chronologically but desperately serious at any given date. He has a circulating fever, but his temperature goes up to alarming heights. And,' thoughtfully, 'he's a bit of a cad. So you'd better be careful. Oh, I mean what I say. He's quite capable of locking the door on you. He has no manners in these things. I have had awful trouble with him.'

Jean skipped that part.

'But I don't care about him — in that way — at all.'

Esther laughed. 'I like your "in that way." Beware! Everyone has probably thought he only had a mental fascination for them... and they for him. I merely warn you.'

'Oh, I'm safe — so's he.' She thought so: said to herself if there were a person in the world whom one could not hurt, it was Stephen. She could, without any pang of conscience, flirt with him, try her new clothes on him, adjust herself to the atmosphere with him — since it was entirely safe. Safe for her, safe for him. She did see him constantly, both at work and play; she was secretary to his committee, he was her constant partner in the parties Esther arranged. Though Esther's young men varied, Stephen was always there, for her: so much and so obviously there for her that questions about him and Esther, belonging only to the past, fell away. Who, in 1917, could think about the past? The uncertain future blotted it out, retrospectively. There was a present Jean did not like thinking about, and Stephen helped her not to. That was all. He helped her the more efficiently that, whether as a result of her clothes or no, she had to admit, before she had been two months under Esther's roof, that he was, in fact, falling in love with her. At first this did not seem to matter; but it began to matter when it dawned upon her that he was serious: that he was in love in a sense quite different from that in which Esther and her crowd used the word.

They were perpetually falling in and out of love, all of them. They played with it, unwearyingly. They talked of little else. If you must not mention the war, what else was there to talk about? Judged by their actions, however, this love of theirs was a trifling business, not much more significant than the clothes which provided its technique, on the

feminine side. Nevertheless, there was hardly one of them, male or female, who had not, at intervals, talked to her as though, somehow, it were vastly important; more important, indeed, than anything.

Of course, they talked to her, or so she guessed, mainly because they believed that she took them seriously. At first she did: she was still enough the provincial Puritan for that. Soon, however, a doubt invaded her mind as to whether, with most of them, talk were not all there was to it: whether they were nearly as experienced in promiscuity as they would have liked to think and to have her think. A good many of them, she came to feel sure, were, whether from lack of opportunity or of courage, much more 'moral' than they made out.

Even so, the logic of their talk puzzled her. How did they manage to be so intensely serious, at a given moment, about X, and, six months later, X being killed or otherwise substituted, equally clamant for her sympathy in their feelings about Y? How did they manage, further, to reach the view that any affection for one's own husband (or wife) was bourgeois and banal, while one for a friend's husband (or wife) was a grand passion? Affection, so conceived, seemed to have boundless rights, and no duties: everyone else was to bow down before the individual under its sway, every code of manners or morals give way; then, it was spoken of with bated breath, as the one reality. One's time, one's thoughts, one's own (and other people's) money were appropriately dedicated to its service. Nothing else, as they put it, 'counted.' Yet this solemn and sacred emotion appeared to change its object and direction with the most fluent ease; and the 'in and out' stage was the one found most interesting, both by the participant and the observers. She found herself wondering whether love was really important:

whether she, Jean, was saying anything when she said to herself that she, throughout, loved Harold and him only; when, still, she felt that, if he could realize that, he would, somehow, be released from his suffering and cleansed of his sense of guilt. What, really, did she mean by it? What was it that, now, worried her mind when she thought of Stephen? Was it what he called his love for her? It seemed that the price she was now paying for her folly and selfishness in those spring and summer months of 1917 was that she could not answer the simple question — is love important or not?

Yet, vaguely and afar off, an answer loomed at her, which, in its turn, was an accusation. There is a love that is important — the love that gives. It is sacrificial, but sacrificial of itself. Masquerading in its shape, claiming its sacred rights and privileges, is the love that takes — ruthless, rapacious, potent mainly for evil. Between them, called though they are by one name, yawned the gulf of death. For Stephen had given her real love and she had not recognized it.

Pictures rose up before her: talking pictures, for with Stephen everything got itself expressed in words. He was as fond of them as she was — or had been; for now, as she recalled so many of her own that had far better have been left unspoken, she was filled with a hatred of her words. She heard him telling her that he cared; had begun to care, indeed, on that day in the Trough of Boland. At the time, that had been only one of his phrases. She had not taken him seriously. She had been flattered too, at first; had felt she had won her spurs — without a lover one was nothing in Esther's set. Then, when she began to realize he might be serious, a vague discomfort had seized her. Growing, that at least showed her that so far as she was concerned any notion such as she had toyed with for a space that she might

care for him was sheer self-deception. She tried to convey this to him, without success. He was more, not less attracted. She might blind herself to the meaning of that by saying sustained resistance was new in his experience. 'He eats you up — then spews you out — London's full of women he has done that to,' Esther had said. It might be true; it did not touch her case. The last thing she would have expected from him was respect — he professed, loudly, a cynical disrespect of the opinions and motives of others. Yet he respected hers; respected them so absolutely that it was with a sense of sharp pain and self-contempt that she thought back over the moments — for they were not more, though they had seemed endless at the time — of what she called to herself their crisis. He tried to kiss her, took her in his arms. And instinctively, so instinctively that she could not control the motion, she shrank away from him. He saw it, of course. There was a look in his face, in his eyes she was never to forget. It had been abominable of her. Yet she was unable to help it, because, idiot that she was, she had been as little prepared as he for that shrinking of hers. Idly, shamelessly, her mind had played with the idea of being kissed by him. She had known it would come to that: and when she said 'kiss,' she had no subterfuges as to what it covered. She made no excuses for herself. There were none to make. She had played with fire, and he had burned his fingers. She had known it would come, but she had not known, in the least, how she would feel it. In fact, she felt it horrible. Horrible, simply because it was his. Not because of anything ugly, anything animal behind it, but in itself. Because she neither then did nor ever could care for him. Other people might flop in and out, but she, once and for all, was not like that. Hide from it, evade it, be ashamed of it, try to forget it as she might, there was only one person

whom she wanted to kiss her. She knew it, on the instant. Stephen knew it too. He made no attempt after that at love-making. She came home, after that evening, feeling a little ashamed, but not nearly as much ashamed as she ought to have felt: feeling, above all, shattered and bereft. Bereft — that for her was sharpest. Selfishness, again: but there it was.

It grew in the next few days, during which she did not see him; she was lost without him: starved. Then he reappeared and, without saying anything, resumed where they had broken off, with no difference save that his talk was, now, altogether about things: utterly impersonal. Yet now, no more than, at bottom, then, could she cheat herself into the belief that she did not know what he was doing, or what it cost him. She knew perfectly well, now and then, that the most completely egocentric individual she had ever encountered was showing a degree of unselfishness that made her weep inside. For it was for her sake, more than his own, that he was again giving her friendship. He was keeping her alive, on the terms she could take. And now, if not then, she could realize what that cost. For it was what she had not been able to do for Harold. Even if he were to be given back to her alive — a thought not to be entertained for an instant, since she *knew* he could not be — she had no idea how she should attempt it. Yet she thought she loved Harold. It was Stephen who showed her how far she was from understanding what love meant, Stephen who had in truth given love to her, during months in which she had greedily taken his sacrifice without realizing in the least what it was. And Harold had killed Stephen — not because he cared for her, but because he thought that she cared for Stephen. So, to the uttermost farthing, Stephen had paid the price of love. And Harold too would pay. While she was left...

Like a whirling kaleidoscope the days glittered in their unmeaning pattern until they suddenly settled into the day of catastrophe: and then, every word came back to her: every feeling she had had at the time, just as she had had it then.

There was nothing special in her going to tea with Stephen on that day. It was a Friday and she more or less regularly went to tea with him on Fridays. The time was convenient, since he was then free of the House, which during its sessions occupied him on other week-days, as speaking or other engagements did over the week-end. She had arrived, as usual, with her satchel full of papers: all those papers that, at moments, made her feel busy and important, and then, at others, devastatingly futile — the more futile the more vivid the illusion of importance had been. She never had any steady, constant sense that the work mattered, such as she knew sustained many worthy and enviable members of the committee: men and women who were giving their time with a sincere conviction of martyrdom to work that hardly created a ripple on the surface of public opinion. It was amazing how they sustained that sense in contact with Stephen. But then they saw much less of Stephen than she did; he did not talk to them frankly (or if he did they did not understand), all they saw was that he went on doing it. Yes, he did; that had to be set against his talk. Perhaps the stupid members of the stupid committee were right. Somewhere, carefully hidden, even from himself, there must have been latent in Stephen an element of what could only be called a conscience: a sense of duty, which acted, despite the scorn he constantly poured on any such thing. Was this, indeed, the explanation of his scorn, that the ideals he despised were in himself, that he had

not succeeded in eradicating his inheritance? Why, otherwise, did he bother with work that, on his own showing, was futile? Why did he not simply leave it alone? Why was he a pacifist? After all, despite what Lady Henshaw had said about his itch for the limelight, there was not much of that to be got out of pacifism: and what there was was most expensive. The scales were heavily weighted on the disagreeable side — far too heavily for that easy explanation to cover the facts. No: what he called the moral bacillus must lurk in him somewhere — or it would never have occurred to him to be ashamed of it.

On this afternoon he was there when she arrived. Lo Sing let her in: opening the door as always with a sudden swift softness that suggested he had been behind it for some time, looking at you through it with those impenetrable eyes that could penetrate surfaces much denser than its wood. He never smiled: the expression with which he regarded her never varied. Behind that mask all Stephen's secrets, all his own, might lie — or might not. He said nothing; he never did; he merely led her to the sitting-room, opened its door for her to pass in, closed it silently behind her. No door in the flat creaked: they swung on their hinges as softly as though they were curtains. The hall being very dark and Lo Sing conveying, not by reason of his black garb but by some emanation of his personality, a thick nocturnal atmosphere, there was a shock to which she never got used in finding the room full of light: dazzling sunshine bathing the Embankment Gardens, reflecting from the glass roofs of the huts in the foreground, and sparkling on the river beyond them. The room was long, and extended away to the left as one entered, with one window opposite and two more beyond it, long French windows with balconies, open wide, for the day was very hot. Stephen was standing on the balcony

outside the furthest window. At her entrance, Jean had indeed not perceived him: her eye was caught and held by a round glass bowl on a low table between the two windows, full of sweet peas of every shade from pale mauve to that deep red purple that is almost black, most of them being a strong blue-purple. Their colours had a sinister vividness against the violent blue of the walls — a harsh bright blue: what in Jean's childhood had been known as Reckitt's blue — and banned, altogether, as a colour. There was a great deal of this blue, for Stephen, who had theories about everything, thought books ugly, and banished them to another room, opening off the big one at the far end, which they completely lined from floor to ceiling, in order to have the blueness of his walls broken only by his pictures. There was a still life — French, in the modern manner, at either end, and, in the middle, facing the central window, a long, large, and — so Jean thought — hideous nude of a black woman lying on a white bed. She loathed that picture: that it was brilliantly painted, that the expression on the woman's face was marvellous — the melancholy of satiety creeping into the eyes while the full mouth still smiled with triumphant lasciviousness — only made it worse. She had puzzled much as to whether Stephen really liked it or had it out of bravado, and had come to the conclusion that its being there was an act of bravado, but of a bravado addressed not to others but to himself. He did not like it — but for some obscure reason he wished to, felt he ought to. Oughts again. Yes, in his secret soul Stephen was full of them.

'I always wonder when I see that picture why you like me,' she said, as he came in from the balcony. 'Are you ashamed of it?'

'Of liking the picture?'

'Oh, no. I know you're proud of that: of liking me.'

Stephen looked at her.

'Clever girl. That's why I like you.'

'But you *are* ashamed of it?'

Stephen had moved over to the tea-table and handed her a cup of tea.

'Put down those papers — yes, over there. I refuse to look at any of them yet. I'm glad to see, too, that you are feeling the same. Papers — committees — people like Atkins and Miss Peel — they just clutter up one's life and blot out one's outlines. There's nothing in any of them that matters *that.* They're like those vile huts that get between me and the river — there they are, rows of them, full of busy-bodies sweltering like so many flies in the sun; and fancying they're making the world move.'

'And yet,' she clutched at the chance of moving off the personal line, 'we behave just like them. Sometimes I get the illusion, you know, that we might even stop the war. Don't you?'

'No — no. I've never sunk to that. I know it's all utterly futile.'

'Why do you bother, then?'

'The inherited bug, I suppose. Can't keep quiet. Also to despise people thoroughly you must work with them.'

'No, no. The bug, as you call it, goes deeper. It's what I was trying to express about that picture. And me. There's a strain of morals in you. Though you're ashamed of it.'

Stephen smiled.

'Don't look so severe. Take off your hat and sit down. That's better. So you think I'm ashamed... of liking you?'

Their eyes met on that and it was Jean's turn to feel ashamed. She had intended nothing serious, but here they were, heads over in the deep waters. And by her doing.

Stephen, with amazing loyalty, had avoided them in all these months: she now had heedlessly plunged right in.

'I am, you know... Of going on, I mean.'

She strove desperately for the lightness of her first entry on this fatal territory. 'I dare say. For I suppose you know that what you like is just the part of me that by every theory you despise.'

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'isn't it funny? It's not really your face or your hands — though they are rather exquisite — it's your inflexible Puritanic soul: that hard core of certainty that you know so little about: that began it, I do believe... The not-self: isn't it always that which attracts one? The thing one couldn't have invented and can't, really, understand. It's the one thing in you that eludes me that holds ... or so I say. After all, one can't explain it. It's the one thing one never can. But you aren't listening. What were you thinking about?'

Jean brought her eyes back from the river. 'I don't know,' she began vaguely. But he cut across at once.

'Oh, yes, you do... And you've got to tell me.'

His eyes challenged hers; yet she was not conscious of the eyes: she only felt them like a hand lifting the mist. It was parting; almost without knowing it the word came out:

'Of Harold.'

'Harold!'

Stephen got up sharply. He walked over to the tea-table: poured himself out another cup of tea and drank it down, still with his back to her. Then he came towards her again, where she sat on the sofa, and stood looking at her, an expression on his face she neither could nor tried to fathom.

'Oh, Harold!' he said in a low voice: not harsh now, simply sad. 'I'm sick of Harold.'

'Yes. So am I. Desperately. Sometimes I believe I shall

die of him. I forget him, for stretches. But — he's always there.'

Stephen was still looking at her.

'Yes. But do you realize what he's doing to you? No. You don't; I see it. And I like a fool have been hiding it from you. As if that could help you...'

He was staring hard at her now, his brows contracted and his eyes, even for him, unnaturally bright. Or was that only the effect of his standing with his back to the light? Though they were directed to her, she had the impression that it was not her they saw but something much farther off.

'Funny. You've pulled me right off the line so that I do all sorts of things I don't mean to do.' He laughed. But she hardly heard his laugh: something was waiting for her behind those eyes and as they held her she grew cold with silly apprehension.

'Harold — it's time we cleared up this business of Harold. Do you realize what's happened to him?'

Jean felt herself go paler. Had he had some news which he was keeping from her? He understood and said at once:

'Oh, you needn't start. It's nothing spectacular, nothing extraordinary...'

'Don't torture me... Is there someone else?'

'Oh, you women! Is that all an intelligence can do? You're a hundred per cent brighter than most — and there you go, flop into that fatuity! Someone else! Good Lord, no!' He walked up and down: actually, he was angry. 'Have you forgotten what he is like? Didn't you see him in January? You must have known then; you must know now. You don't? You mean it? Then I must tell you. Though you do really know. Well, listen. He's dead — emotionally, spiritually, dynamically dead. The flesh and bones that go by his name still walk about, but that's all. I haven't met

another case just like it, but there must be lots. He's the logical result. Of war. It's happened to him. Completely. He's the one man I know who knows what it is. You can't know that and live.'

She stared at him, transfixed.

'Why him, I don't know. Perhaps you do. Some funny mixture in him of imagination and, I suppose, courage: real courage which bears the unbearable; real imagination which extends its own suffering over the rest, who can't feel it as he does or there'd be mutiny. He is indeed unique, the only case I know. But *why* isn't here or there. The fact is glaring. He is dead. He ought of course to be killed — but he hasn't even been wounded, has he? No. And in the profound malignity of Providence he probably won't be. The automaton will go on. You must know this. Other women! Perhaps like the rest of us he eats and drinks and goes to bed — but what has that got to do with it? It means nothing to him — nothing to you. It's not what we're talking of. You know that. The truth is as I've stated it. Harold is dead. There it is.'

He paused for a moment. The sun shone on outside; the vivid colours of the room danced; the scent of the sweet peas pervaded the air, but Jean was aware only of a deadly coldness, a darkness before her eyes and in her soul. Stephen went on again, but she did not hear what he said.

He talked on. Her daze persisted. She had no thoughts; only the words he had spoken about Harold hit like stones against the numb walls of her brain.

'Jean, Jean,' Stephen's voice got through at last. 'Don't look like that. I don't believe you've heard a word I've said.'

Her eyes glanced towards him for a moment, but only to plunge back into darkness.

'Jean, Jean, look at me: forgive me. I've hurt you dreadfully, and I can't bear it.'

She looked at him now. Was this Stephen speaking to her with this searching gentleness in his voice? No. It could not be. She must be dreaming. He was kneeling by her now, his elbows on her knees, his hands holding both of hers: and as she looked at him, compelled to look by this queer new quality in his voice, in him altogether, she had for an instant a sensation so strange that it gave her a feeling of vertigo. For on that instant she was looking not into Stephen's eyes, but into Harold's — Harold's, not as she had seen them in the life the war had made, but as she saw them in dreams, all tenderness and loving-kindness. The tenderness, the loving-kindness were there: but, by a miracle that wrenched her very heart as she realized it, there in Stephen. To find in Stephen's eyes the look she had lost in Harold's was an exquisite refinement of cruelty. Did her face show this? Something happened to Stephen. Suddenly, with a queer sound, almost like a sob — more likely a swallowed curse — he got up, moved away from her, across the room; then stood, looking out of the window, his back to her. Idly as if unaware of what he was doing, he picked up a stick which was leaning against the window, and placed it across his writing-table, to his left, nearer to her; but quite vaguely, like a man in a dream. She stared at him; he did not move: minutes passed. Dully the roar of the traffic came up from the Embankment below. There was the click of typewriters: somewhere not so far off the ring of a telephone sounded. Stephen stared out of the window, she stared at him; neither moved, neither seemed able to say anything.

At last, with a movement so brusque that it had an angular effect of suddenness, he came over and sat down beside her.

'My poor dear,' he said very gently, 'I didn't understand. You must forgive me. I forgot. It's Harold you care for — I ought to understand that now if I never did before. Forget what I said. It may be true; I don't know. Does one know anything?'

He looked at her; in his voice there was something that brought the tears to her eyes.

'Oh, Stephen, I'm sorry.'

His arm went round her now with the protecting gentleness of a brother's.

'Yes,' he said. 'I know. But we can't help that. Let's try, though, to help each other. If I can do that for you... if you can talk to me... then we can perhaps bring Harold back.'

His voice was passionless, gentle, kind — nothing in it but that pure kindness which was the one thing she had said to herself he knew, could ever know, nothing of. She shut her eyes that she might not look at him: for her look must hurt; he would know her thoughts were far away from him. He was minding — perhaps, really, for the first time — what happened to someone else, quite selflessly. Poor Stephen ... And the nicer he was the more he must know that for him she had nothing. All that drew him to her showed him that: as he cared, he must know his caring hopeless.

Her eyes were still shut, but now he held her hand, and she felt his lips just brushing her forehead: touching her eyelids as softly as a bird's wing.

Then... everything was broken up, dashed in pieces, destroyed in hideousness.

A rush of air lifted her hair: the door had flown open; someone had come in: she felt Stephen, without releasing her hand, jerk himself upright: a cry in which his voice and another mingled in words she could not catch — but the

other voice shot through her, arrow-like... Harold. Yes, Harold: but Harold with distorted face, a face not his but his father's — standing there in khaki. There was a dark moment of confusion: Stephen rose, knocking over the table with the heavy bronze Buddha on it, at his elbow; then the ear-rending roar and crash of an explosion — a noise so sharp and awful that she shrieked involuntarily; shrieked again, for mingled with her cry was another; Stephen fell back almost on top of her, and something warm and sticky and red was on her face and hands. His face was a mass of blood, pouring down over his eyes, into his mouth, bespattering her. That one inarticulate cry was all he uttered. He lay across the sofa — the sunshine pouring in upon him from the window, one hand still clasped round hers, her skirts still pinned under him. And Harold stood there, pistol smoking in his hand.

At the time, and now, the next few minutes — if they were minutes, not seconds: they felt in retrospect like hours — were darkness. She could not give it features now; it was a black gulf into which she fell. On the other side of it, Lo Sing — a small dark figure only alive in its awful opaque eyes — behind Harold — Harold, standing, not moving, not looking, his pistol in his hand; so still that he might have been an apparition: the whole thing a dream. But there was Lo Sing — and Lo Sing was looking at her and looking at Stephen. At what had been Stephen. There was no face where his had been — only this thing of horror. But it was not that, but Lo Sing standing there that roused her. She knew she must get rid of Lo Sing somehow; that, instantly, became the single thing that mattered.

'Run, run, Lo Sing, and bring a doctor. There's been an accident... the man downstairs. But quick.'

Lo Sing looked at her for another long instant. Then he

was gone, as silently as he had come. And Harold still stood there.

For a moment her eyes returned to Stephen. She unlaced her fingers from his grasp — it was stiffening already: detached her skirt. That mass of blood was not his face. It was nothing... a nightmare. Why did not something wake her? There was some word, if she could only find and utter it, which would let her out of this... she would come to and there would be the dentist, gently murmuring, 'A little warm water now,' and after a minute showing her the tooth that had caused her such pain and was now gone. But there, across the sofa, lay that thing, and Stephen — Stephen whom only a moment ago she had suddenly felt as real and kind — was not here any more. A moment ago she had been grieved about something — she did not any longer know what — and he had comforted her, tried to comfort her, and now it was blotted out in this mess of noise and darkness. And her head ached with fierce pain from the noise; she could not make it work through that noise: if only it would stop. But it did not stop, and this was Stephen.

She stood up: turned. Ah, no, it was a dream. For there was Harold, and Harold was in France. That figure standing there, not looking at her, but out over the river, at the sky, faintly tinged now by the bright colour that was beginning to dye the west — it was an apparition. But the sky was real: it moved; it changed; suddenly now a cloud had come up from somewhere and was passing over the unseen sun; the colour changed; the sky went first black, then white and cold. She shivered. She stared at the man, standing there, tall and still in his khaki, and her senses whirled in vertigo. She had no words because she had no thoughts.

Now, looking back, her inability to speak at that moment seemed to her appalling and preposterous. The word she

should have said was so awfully plain... to speak to Harold was so poignantly the one thing that mattered. But it had not been so then. She had not even moved towards him. She had said nothing, he had not looked at her, when Lo Sing came back with the doctor. After that the room seemed full of people: and everything collapsed into complete confusion. Talking — talking to inspectors, constables, doctors, lawyers — people she knew, people she didn't. A dark blur, shaken by incessant flashing noises that never stopped.

CHAPTER V

OCTOBER sunshine — the most beautiful, Roberta thought, in the year; was that a sign that she was growing middle-aged? if so she did not care — was pouring in again at the windows when she drew back her bedroom curtains next morning. She had slept heavily and awoke refreshed: it was good to stand in the sun and feel the air. No sounds of domestic activity in the flat: no fragrant smell of coffee. When she entered the studio, it felt dark and stuffy: full of ghosts. She drew the heavy black velvet curtains: cast up the windows at the bottom. The roses had died: their heads hung brown from their collapsing stems: on the table lay a little pool of petals. In the fireplace grey ashes were heaped high; Jean must have sat on there till very late, turning things over and over in her mind. Poor Jean; Roberta felt desperately sorry for her. And the worst was still to come. This afternoon, probably, it would all be settled, the verdict pronounced. Could there be any doubt as to what it would be? Was it even to be hoped that Harold should not be condemned?

What would happen if he were? He would be hanged; 'hanged by the neck till he be dead.' Horrible. There she stopped. With Harold her concern was not acute. But what about Jean? She was young: barely thirty; life was before her — the best of life, the period when one learned to take things less personally, to lay them less bitterly to heart. So far, she had not made of it what she might. Roberta had a great fund of belief in her friends, and Jean was, to her mind, the brightest among them; it had been disappointing,

her doing nothing more interesting than marrying Harold. Now, that was over. Whatever happened to Harold would, in the holocaust of the war, be soon forgotten: by the time the war was over, if it ever was, forgotten even by Jean. She could start afresh: could do something...

Moving softly, for she did not want to wake her — let her sleep as long as she could — Roberta set about preparing breakfast. There was no time to do the studio; she would eat hers in the kitchen, and take Jean's in to her on a tray. While waiting for the kettle to boil, she picked up the newspaper. Things were evidently going very wrong in Russia: there was a frightful muddle there; and the casualty list was no shorter. The kettle boiled; she threw the sheets on the ground, with no more than a hasty glance at the other headlines — 'Another Air Raid,' 'The Claviger Case — Verdict Expected To-Day'... It was simply yesterday's paper over again.

Jean's voice, still full of sleep, answered to her knock. The room was dark as she entered, but when the curtains were drawn the light poured in, dazzling.

'Another lovely morning,' she said brightly. 'No post — there never seems to be a post nowadays.'

Jean had sat up and was pushing the hair out of her eyes. She looked dazed, as though not yet adjusted to her surroundings.

'What day is it?' she asked.

'Wednesday, October twelfth.'

'Wednesday, October twelfth,' repeated Jean thoughtfully. 'Stephen's birthday. He had a plan — we were going to do something on that day. I promised, I know, to keep it. Can you take it in, Berta? I can't.'

Roberta shook her head. 'Have you slept at all?' she asked.

'I don't know. I think so. It seems years since last night.'

'I'm afraid you've been thinking.'

Jean looked at her. Her eyes were dreadful.

'Oh, no. Only remembering. It's not at all the same thing. I can't think.'

'The coffee isn't as good as when you make it, but do drink some. I suppose I ought to be getting off. It ought to finish to-day. The trial, I mean.'

'Oh, yes. Yes, I suppose so. Yes. What is it, Berta? There's something on your mind. Don't be refined, at this stage.'

'I suppose Eden thinks he may get him off...'

Jean shook her head. 'No doubt. But how can he? There's still something worrying you: what is it? Do I want him to get off? Is that it? I don't know. Anyhow, what does it matter what I want? I know Harold doesn't want it. Oh, yes, I'm sure of that. And that's the only thing that signifies.'

Was it? Whether or no, it was a point on which she, apparently, must remain in the dark. Her practical mind, however, was still haunted by the alternative possibility.

'Eden is very clever, you know. And nowadays people don't react normally; you can't tell what they'll do.'

'Do you mean twelve men can be brought to say a man did not kill another man, when they know he did? Nonsense. That's what they're asked. Not whether he ought to have done, but whether he did.'

Yes — that was McClure's point. What had he said?

'This is not the place, and my learned colleague is not the man, to appeal to your sentimental emotions in the name of what is popularly called the unwritten law. To that I need not insult him or you by referring. We are in England; in the High Court; you are called upon honestly and faithfully

to administer, not some novelistic code, but the clear and unambiguous law of the land. By that law the prisoner is guilty of murder. I call upon you fearlessly and duly to say so, on the evidence of facts which cannot be disputed.' She felt the force of that, yet even at the time something in her had resisted it. All she said was:

'I expect you're right. It does seem certain... But — suppose the impossible happens: suppose they believe Eden — say it was self-defence — and anyhow there's a war on: they might, you can't tell: suppose he's acquitted?'

'Yes?'

'Oughtn't you to be there?'

'What for?'

'Well — he'll want you.'

Jean looked at her and shook her head.

Roberta was not convinced. 'I bet you're wrong. After all, why did he do it?'

'Ah, if I understood that...'

'Anyhow, I think you ought to be prepared for his coming here after it's over, if...'

Again Jean shook her head. 'Oh, no,' she said.

'He knows where you are?'

'Yes: he knows that.'

'Well, if he does get off, I shall not come straight back. I shall ring you up, anyhow, one way or the other, as soon as it's settled; you can count on that; and if Eden wins, you'll know the studio is entirely yours. I shan't come bursting in. I'm sorry I've had no time to do it — but you'll have plenty.'

Jean gave a wintry smile.

'All that is nonsense.'

'Yes, probably. But one ought to be prepared, for everything. Could you bear it if he did come?'

An extraordinary flush dyed Jean's pale cheeks.

'I? Oh, I could bear it. But — he won't.'

Puzzled, more puzzled than ever, Roberta left the room. She gathered up her possessions and departed.

She was, really, in very good time; Mr. Hughes's clerk had again looked after her: although the Court was more crowded than ever, she got her excellent seat again. Round her there was a hum of talk and excitement.

'Do you know, I can't understand Mrs. Claviger at all,' said the woman sitting beside her: a woman with whom she had had some talk yesterday. 'How *can* she stay away?'

Roberta felt angry at once. 'Can't you?' she said quickly. 'What could she do? It would only be ghoulish of her to come.'

The woman sniggered. 'Come — that's on us too, isn't it? But, good Heavens! whatever my husband had done, I'd be here. After all I'd want him to know there was one person who believed in him, one friendly face. Poor Claviger looks so lost and lonely. I couldn't bear it. I'm falling in love with him, you know. Just by looking at him. Ah, here he is.'

Harold had that effect. How funny it was! He had, of course, said nothing: he had not opened his lips; he sat there rigid and immobile, his face apparently set in stone, his arms folded over his breast so that only one hand could be seen — a hand with long strong fingers: effective, rather than artistic fingers; and yet for some reason half the people in Court (men too as well as women) were aware of this strong personal attraction. She felt it: after two long days of looking at him, she was nearer understanding what Jean felt — or had felt: surely had felt — about him than she had ever before. Was that because he was the centre of the horrible sensual atmosphere surrounding a creature over whom a death penalty hovers? What was this frightful attraction

possessed by the idea of death? Did death of others enhance one's own vitality? Was that why war — orgy of other people's death — stimulated, nay, even exhilarated, so many: that they felt the obscene thing round them and yet themselves walked free? Harold, very near the grim adventure, had its aura round his brows. She looked at him again now, as amid a murmur, instantly subdued, he was led in to the dock. Her own growing attraction did not reside in his good looks. They happened to be of a simple masculine type that did not interest her, although she admitted a sort of pleasure in the sight of anyone so harmoniously built and balanced: tall, he was of just the right breadth for his height; his head was admirably placed; his movements had an easy, careless grace; his clothes, unassuming, showed the right degree of wear, were the sort of clothes one never saw except on an Englishman. What she felt, however, was not his looks, rather his atmosphere: an atmosphere of authority, of definite personality, of something of his own, the more impressive because unconscious; because, to her at any rate, he suggested that, even at this moment, it was not of himself that Harold Claviger was thinking.

Her neighbour was chatting again.

'You know Mr. Eden is going to the Front? Oh, yes, this is his last case: he was going some weeks ago and only put it off to defend Claviger.'

Roberta, who knew this, merely nodded. How clever Eden was!

'It is so, indeed,' the woman reiterated. 'Everyone is saying so. Splendid of him: McClure would never do a thing like that: he'll stay and gather in the shekels.'

The evidence of Eden's witnesses was designed to fill in and support the picture that he had drawn in outline in his

cross-examination of Lo Sing, the doctor, and Mrs. Exton. A woman who had on the fatal afternoon been resting on her bed in the flat below Stephen's declared that she had heard sounds overhead that waked her, and went on for some seconds or possibly even minutes before the shot: sounds of a struggle. Another neighbour on the same floor confirmed this, rather feebly, Berta thought; nor did either of them, to her mind, come very well out of McClure's cross-examination. The sound, interpreted as a struggle, might have been the knocking over of the table, which was actually found upon its side; and Stephen could very easily have knocked it over as he rose from the sofa. Alternatively, it might have come from outside. Evidence by the individual who had recently repaired Stephen's sword-stick confirmed Esther's statement that he was an expert fencer; so did the Chinaman, recalled to prove that it was on the fatal afternoon in a position where the dead man could easily have got at it; actually, indeed, lying on the table, not in its usual corner by the window.

Roberta listened to all this and wondered what Harold felt about it. She had never asked Jean — the only other person who knew — what had happened in Stephen's flat. Was it a mere cock-and-bull story? She did not know. She was as ignorant as any member of the jury. All this talk about the exact position of articles and the exact time of noises confused her mind thoroughly. Nor did she quite see the point of the testimony given by a spick-and-span gentleman in khaki covered with tabs and ribbons, who testified to Harold's superior utility and quality as an officer.

'We want him back: he's indispensable,' he declared handsomely.

'I wish I were on the jury,' she heard the woman next her muttering.

'Do you really? I don't. What would you do?'

'Acquit him, of course. He ought to be thanked publicly. Vermin, worse than Germans: I wish I had the chance of dealing with them. It's a good thing that one of them is disposed of — and the worst, I gather.'

Eden was now on his feet, and now Roberta began to realize the justice of his immense reputation. He opened by a panegyric, artistic in its restraint, on the British officer: the man who, with nothing in his heart but hatred of bloodshed, nevertheless took up the sword of justice when a call came to defend those intangible but eternal values on which life in any civilized sense depends: 'Standards of conduct between nations, standards of conduct between individuals.' He described him as a crusading knight, dedicated and apart: a being compact of personal sacrifice, who, without a backward thought, left all that was most dear to him to obey the call of principle. 'We are involved, we here in this Court, we as a nation, in the greatest of struggles: great, not only in its area, but in the principles involved. Of that struggle, what we do here is as much a part as what our sons, brothers, husbands are doing in France and any of the far-flung theatres of actual fighting. We talk of the home front — and the expression is literally accurate. We have not only got to do nothing that will make their tasks more difficult: we have a positive task of defence — defence here of the standards for which they are fighting and suffering there. What are those standards?'

He made an impressive pause. 'Yes, what?' Roberta asked herself. Did she know? Did any of them? She did not. The thing had happened: that was all, as far as she was concerned: it had smashed down, destroying what she cared for. But Mr. Eden was answering his own question.

'I shall not try to put them in my feeble words. I shall

not even quote any of the great statesmen of our day who have done so for us.' (Thank God, no Asquith, thought Roberta.) 'I shall merely recall to you a sentence from a great Englishman of the past who, at the time of a struggle as vital in its day as ours, said: "The principles of politics are those of morality enlarged, and I neither now do nor ever can admit of any others." It is those principles of morality that lie behind the law, national and international, and give it its sanction, that I want to recall to you. They are enshrined in what we call the code of honour — honour between men, honour between men and women, honour between nations, honour between citizens and their nation.' Codes, sanctions, principles, ideas — to all these things in the abstract the English mind was supposed to be averse. Perhaps it was. But it had an unequalled power of recognizing them in the concrete and acting upon them.

'I shall say no more to you on general lines: I shall certainly, as my learned colleague has done me the simple justice of assuming, not appeal to any unwritten law. I have no need, no wish to do so. What I am going to ask you to do is to look at something much more real, relevant, and rare — a man. Men are what have made our country great. Thank God, they are not uncommon — although by no means everyone who goes about in male form and attire deserves that simple yet glorious title.' ('No indeed,' muttered Roberta's neighbour. 'Henshaw!')

Roberta felt suddenly sorry for Harold. How he must be hating all this! And there was worse to come: Eden was now retelling the facts of the case; so queer they sounded to her, as put by him.

'Harold Claviger in the summer of 1914 was the ordinary young Briton of his age and class: a hard worker, living in the North of England where, so they tell us, life is saner and

simpler than here in our sophisticated London; happily married to a young wife; rich in friends; no more interested in politics than the average healthy young man, more concerned with doing than talking. Hundreds, thousands like him. Suddenly the aspect of his world is changed: the test of his manhood, of his courage, of his power to feel a great idea, to answer a big call, is upon him. Instantly he is there. With him to see the right thing is to do it. Between moral impulse and response in action there is no gap.

'You may say he only did what everybody else did. But that in his case was not so. For his most intimate friend, a man whom for his superior agility of brain and gift of speech, Claviger from college days had admired: a man, too, who in parentage, inheritance, the surroundings of high culture, wealth, and elegance was undoubtedly superior to him — failed absolutely at this same test. The pure in heart saw truly where the sophisticated intellect failed. Stephen Henshaw stood aside, did not hear his country's call. Worse than that: he used great powers of mind and the influence given him by his position as a Member of Parliament, to hamper it. Yet out of his friendship and the sterling simplicity of his heart, Harold Claviger did not condemn him; he did not ask others to make sacrifices; he made them himself; more, even after a year in France, with all that meant in knowledge of his country's need, he protected his friend, because he was his friend, from the consequences of his own action. So high was his conception of the loyalty of friend to friend.

'But there are other loyalties. And the fine mind puts fine things first. How in his own action Harold Claviger did this, you have heard in the testimony of his officer — which could have been multiplied indefinitely, but is sufficient as it stands. You heard Colonel Agnew say that the one desire

of his comrades is to have him back among them. So clear is the sense of values bred by danger, in contact with the elemental forces of life. Duty first. Second to duty to his country came duty to his wife. The wife he loved and trusted he had to leave alone; he commended her, at his second leave, to Stephen Henshaw, for, though he hated his views, he did not see, as we can see, how those views expressed, not a part of the man, but the whole man. Defeatism, as preached and practised by men like Stephen Henshaw, is a poison that infects the whole man. "The principles of politics are those of morality enlarged" — and *vice versa*. A man who feels no obligation to his country feels none to his friends — or his friends' wives. You have heard Mrs. Exton's evidence. Whatever else emerges from it, this does — she was not the first or the last victim of Stephen Henshaw's undisciplined and unprincipled lust. Yes, I use that word and use it advisedly. It is a harsh word: one from which we are apt to shrink; but the only one that fits this case. Mrs. Exton's husband was at the front: was, alas, for he was killed ten days ago. Jean Claviger's husband was at the front. That made no difference to Stephen Henshaw — or rather it did, it gave him an opportunity he did not scruple to take. How far he succeeded in Jean Claviger's case you must judge for yourself. Harold Claviger believed that he had: and he had letters from Mrs. Exton that compelled him to believe it. Put yourselves in his place.'

'Put yourselves in his place.' Roberta found her attention wandering from Eden: her eyes reverting to Harold. Looking at him told her no more now than it had done before.

But Eden was building up his picture — reconstructing the scene when Harold arriving found Stephen and Jean 'in a position which no man who is a man can or should accept':

which in itself, he suggested, would entitle him to claim that this was no case of murder. He went on to amplify the character of Stephen Henshaw. He had a weapon; he knew how to use it; whatever else he lacked, he did not lack courage. In vividly dramatic terms he described the struggle between them. 'In so far as in self-defence, and in the protection of his honour, Harold Claviger was compelled to raise his hand against his friend, and to see that friend for what he was, he, the man I am proud to defend, has already suffered a punishment none of us can fully measure. But do not forget this: it might have been the sword of Stephen Henshaw that penetrated the heart of Harold Claviger. In a struggle between two men of equal age and strength, what gives life to one and death to the other is a matter whose decision is in the hands of Providence. We have had many notable signs in these latter years of the degree to which that overruling Power, which at times we all of us show so little regard, had been exercised for the protection of this nation in its struggle to defend the right. With all respect, and with a full sense of what I am saying, I suggest to you, gentlemen of the jury, that in the determination of the struggle between these two men, which in my feeble words I have tried to set before you, as, on the evidence of witnesses, it must have happened, we have one more instance of that same Providential working. Evil is evil, whether it comes before you in the national body of Germany or in the individual body of a Stephen Henshaw.'

Across the deathly silence of the Court the sibilant hiss of the consonants resounded.

Roberta shivered as she stared at Harold. He sat as he had sat throughout, his arms folded, his eyes fixed on nothing: the one man in the Court unmoved. He knew — she did not — what reality in this case was; all she did know

was that this was not it. And, ignorant as she was of the law, she felt an obscure repugnance to Eden's whole approach, like that caused her by an effective black-and-white in which the drawing is wrong. But she was, she knew, a non-conductor, because Eden's atmospheric effects, his lighting, left her cold. He was using the war: on that her nerves were dead; they made no responsive quiver. It was, to her, a thunderstorm, most horribly protracted: she hated it, but had no opinion about it. As for feeling it a revelation of God... and that was his whole point... what was it, this immense emotional stimulus, this mystic transvaluation of all values, that other people felt, and she did not feel? what was it that happened to their nerves and not to hers? She was normal enough — and yet here was a mass experience of which she was left out. She felt like the strange people who 'see nothing' in Rubens. The rising temperature from the Court made her feel cold. But she realized it, as a fact, and one that McClure's closing address, with its irrefutable cold logic, was not calculated to affect. Even she could barely listen to him.

McClure sat down. There was a moment of tense hush, for now at last the Judge was summing up. He was a small man; his face, inside that vast wig, looked tiny; but though small he somehow conveyed to her at any rate a feeling of immense wisdom and authority. The voice that came from between his narrow lips was cool as water but as clear; if anything could lower the temperature, this would.

His summing-up seemed to her scrupulously fair and absolutely damning. He began by pointing out that the area of fact in dispute was exceedingly limited: that it was concerned entirely with the time by no witness put higher than a very few minutes, possibly seconds, between the arrival of the prisoner at the murdered man's flat and the

firing of the fatal shot. On what happened in those minutes no one could report with knowledge save the prisoner and the prisoner's wife, neither of whom the defence had put in the box — a fact of which the jury must take note. That the Crown did not call Mrs. Claviger needed no explanation: a wife could not be called upon to give evidence against her husband. That rule, just and humane, did not, however, preclude her appearance as a witness for the defence.

Roberta felt her heart sink. Extraordinary, but she had never thought of this. But the woman at her side evidently took another view.

'Hateful man! But what did I say about her not being here? She and Henshaw are a pair.'

The Judge was continuing his review of the facts. Roberta, trying in vain to denude her mind of feeling, to listen as though she were a member of the jury, realized from the sensations of faintness that overcame her that she was not in the least clear in mind or impartial in judgment. She wanted to agree with Eden: to believe that there had been a struggle; to see Harold acquitted. But how could she? The case, that had looked impregnable as stated by Eden and had seemed to her to survive McClure's final speech, was now melting away before her eyes, till there was nothing of it left. How flimsy, insubstantial, artificial it looked, this construction of sleeping women's impressions: this suggestion that a sword-stick never taken out of its case had any part in the affair! She scanned the faces of the jury, but could make nothing of them. One man was nodding his head, with a look of bright intelligence, but was he agreeing or disagreeing? She could not guess. And he was only one. The others looked numb. 'While learned counsel thus differ in their review and interpretation of the facts, they also differ widely in the atmosphere against which they invite

you to see these facts. It will have struck you that the war was not mentioned in the speech for the Crown: a feat in these days, perhaps an excessive one. In that for the defence, on the other hand, it was the leading note. Again I venture to think that the word excessive applies to some at any rate of learned counsel's analogies and inferences. There are obvious qualifications to be entered to the plea "Put yourselves in his place." Duty — your duty as a jury — is not exhausted by saying, "There but for the Grace of God go I." You may sympathize with a murderer: you must not therefore extenuate his crime, for, if so, you fail in your first obligation to the community, which the law exists to safeguard and protect. So, with every sympathy and much admiration for the power and skill of the defence, your minds must revert to the facts.'

On this summing-up, calm, judicial, measured, but hopelessly damaging to the defence, the jury could only condemn. She scanned their faces for the hundredth time, and for the hundredth time abandoned the effort to weld their expressions into one result. The intricate process of cancelling out and mutual interaction was beyond guessing.

The summing-up was notably brief: at four o'clock the Judge dismissed the jury and the murmur of talk among the audience broke out again, gradually growing louder. She stared obstinately in front of her at the place where Harold had sat immovably aloof, in order not to be drawn into conversation by her neighbours. They must talk, but they could talk across her. She was not going to be drawn in. As the minutes passed she felt her heart beat sickeningly. 'Thank goodness, Jean isn't here. How could she bear it?' But how could she bear it at home? One bore things, because there was nothing else to do. And Jean, impatient in speech, never to be judged by her own words about herself,

had, in action, the enormous patience that must be possessed by an artist. Playing the piano, like drawing, involved that, if one was talking of anything serious: endless capacity for taking pains, for waiting, for doing a thing over and over again. People scoffed at that definition of genius, but it was right if *endless* were stressed, as it ought to be. Anything that was really endless was invincible. If it did not seem to be, that was because it was not really endless. Endless: Harold Claviger looked endless; as if he could sit there for ever, without moving or altering his position. There was something fearfully impressive about that man, something that rose above, almost obliterated his good looks. It was suddenly appalling to think that within minutes the word might be spoken that would finish him: consign that endless will to annihilation. Leave out the horror and humiliation of the hangman's rope — she suddenly had an image of that side of it, which had never occurred to her before, but dismissed it with a shake — leave out all that, and it was still quite appalling to feel that Harold Claviger might be dropped, on a word from the fat-faced foreman of the jury, into annihilation. His image rose again before her, more vivid it seemed even than the actuality she had gazed at through the many hours, and she asked herself, again, How could he keep that rigid calm? How? What a fool she was! Was he not, had he not for nearly three years, been facing that every hour? Had not it been his business, his occupation, his sole use — to face his own annihilation and as far as possible postpone it by annihilating others? What nonsense it was, this trial! He was to be hanged for killing one man, when the blessing of his country accompanied him in the effort to kill hundreds — nay, since he was a gunner, thousands. Her mind swerved in the dark. The Judge, who had half an hour ago sounded so wise, now

seemed a chattering idiot. Not for any of Eden's solemn and absurd reasons, but on a simple honest facing of facts, Harold ought to be acquitted — given a licence to go on killing.

'Of course he was an Englishman.' A voice broke across. Yes: that was the difference. He might, nay, he must kill Germans, but an Englishman...

'Oh, no: that sort of man isn't. He's worse than a German. I'd rather have a patriotic German than him; yes, really I would. Than a traitor. For that's what he was. I'd give Claviger a medal myself: I'd tell him to go on — finish them off: put bullets through Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden and a few more. All these people who've been at that meeting up at Leeds... Workers and Soldiers, indeed... Russia!'

'Never mind: the Americans will be over in no time now.'

The buzz grew loud: everyone seemed to be talking at once. Roberta looked at her watch again. Only twenty minutes. It seemed as many hours. She fixed her gaze on the back of Mr. Claviger senior's head: and became fascinated by the curious placing of his ears — extremely low down and far back, like an animal's. Ears were extraordinary: often the whole significance of a head was in them — get them a fraction of an inch out of position and you altered it unrecognizably. And these strange ears, as she now recalled, were repeated in Harold: not so far back, but more so than the normal. It meant something, that — a likeness to that old man that must be more than skin deep: some secret violence, queerness, must be in him behind his marmoreal calm.

Half an hour. Even the second hand of her watch seemed hardly to move: a minute, when you watched it, was a long time. Had she time to do a drawing of Mr. Claviger's ears?

Yes, perhaps: but she could not make up her mind to stop looking, like everybody else, at the door through which the jury would file back, even for the seconds required for getting out her things. Forty-five minutes; nearly fifty. Ten minutes to five...

Ah... The noise died as though at a signal: there was not a rustle, not a breath; in absolute silence the twelve filed in, grave, important, with creaking boots. What did that solemnity portend? Harold was brought back to his place in the dock. No change there. Bronze, though, for all his pallor, not marble. Bronze — with hot life underneath. Marvellous. 'What a piece of work is a man!' There was something in Eden's nonsense after all.

The foreman stood up.

The Judge leaned ever so little forward.

'Gentlemen of the jury, are you agreed upon your verdict?'

'We are, my lord.'

'Do you find the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty?'

'Not guilty, my lord.'

She was not sure that she had heard aright. Yes: she had; the tension snapped: loud clapping, shouts of 'Bravo,' shrieks, laughter — a tornado of sound was let loose. A minute passed before it could be suppressed: before the Judge's brief words of stinging rebuke of this unseemly demonstration had restored silence. Even then it was not complete, though now the sound came from outside, whither the news had travelled with lightning speed. The Judge spoke, but Roberta did not hear a word. The impossible had happened. Harold was to go on living. She could not stay to look at him; suddenly every other thought was blotted out by the thought of what this must mean to Jean. She must get out instantly — telephone — prepare her.

CHAPTER VI

JEAN got up, dressed and threw herself with feverish energy into the task of 'doing' the studio. The sun, high now in the sky, poured in warm at the windows; its genial radiance, if it mocked her feelings, made her quite hot, as she swept and dusted and polished until the whole room was in the apple-pie order in which Roberta liked to keep it. In her orderliness, as in much else, she was extremely unlike the common idea of the artist; yet she was, as Jean knew, the real thing: she had absolutely the craftsman's mind as well as fingers — drawing always came first. Kind and generous and best of friends as she was, nothing else, for her, ever got in its way. This fact about her was the more illuminating to Jean's mind, because Roberta, although highly gifted with her pencil, was quite without that elusive 'something' that lifts good work into great. It was not merely that she would never make a striking hit, or achieve recognizable success; she faced the fact — and this Jean deeply admired in her — that her work, good as it was, did not, intrinsically, deserve that. There were people who deserved it just as little who got it; Roberta did not grudge it them. Nor — and this was more remarkable — did she ever think of giving up drawing because she perceived the gap between what she could see and what she could do — between appreciation (her own) and performance. She did not think that she could draw like Rubens, but a Rubens drawing made her more, not less, keen to be drawing. Rubens — this, again, was interesting in a creature who, personally, played for safety — was the master she most admired. There might be something pa-

thetic in that — but there it was. Roberta was the sort of artist whom people left out when they talked about artists; the sort who could not be anything else and yet, by her own harsh standard, could never be first-rate. And in this respect, more artists were like her than not.

One saw it in art: but was it not the same in what one vaguely called 'life'? was there not the same gap there between intention and execution? was it not true, there, too, that only the force derived from the power of appreciation could sustain the effort, perpetually doomed to disappointment, at complete achievement? Were not the people who, as one said, mattered to one, always those who could give themselves fully to something impersonal? and so, irrespective of their execution, were made whole by this constant direction of their aim? Jean stopped, duster in hand... Harold was like that... a whole man. She had felt it before, but it was only now, out of a line of thought to all appearance remote from him, that she saw it. Not an artist in any conventional sense: not in the least what was nowadays called an intellectual; yet an artist in so far as he was, always, single-mindedly given to his task. 'An engineer in a Lancashire cotton mill' — she had seen her friends' eyebrows go up, when she had thus described the man she was going to marry. They had been disappointed — for her. 'Somehow, I always thought you would make more of your life,' Agnes Lorbeer had said — putting into words what they all thought. She had not been able to cope with them: not even with Berta, who thought the same; to explain why Harold was more of a person than that description suggested: far more of a person than she was herself. All she could say for herself was that she had seen him.

She had seen him, and her long journey through the past, last night, which had set a gulf between to-day and yester-

day such as it seemed inconceivable had been traversed in barely five or six hours, had given back to her a vivid sense of him, as he then was: also as he now was. Now she could see the two Harolds looking at her: the sunny engineer she had married; the dark and alien soldier who had killed Stephen Henshaw and put her from him with such icy aloofness... and was now moving irretrievably away from her to death.

Still traversing the speckless surface of the mantelpiece with her duster, she stared at the clock above her. The dead face looked down at her; it was not going: it had stopped some days ago and they had forgotten to wind it up. Somehow, its motionless, arrested hands became intolerable to her: they seemed to make real, as nothing yet had done, what was happening to Harold. She laid down her duster, and extracted her watch from the pocket of her overall. A quarter to twelve. She opened the face of the clock, adjusted the hands, wound it; it started ticking at once. Harold was still alive; sitting, as Berta had described him, in the dock, with a face of stone and hands that never moved, while the minutes ticked in his ears, as in hers: minutes that measured off the time he still had to live; minutes that, with dragging slowness and awful inexorability, moved him stage by stage nearer to annihilation. He just sat there, and looked at them. For him, the mere fact that there was nothing to do but sit and look must be torture; for, with him, action was life, to think and to do were one. He thought slowly, but acted instantly. Irresolution, nervous hesitancy, timorous postponement, the idea of waiting for something to turn up from outside to settle his course for him — these things were not in his make-up. His fault was a tendency to impatient action: sometimes, he acted when action was unnecessary; but in thought he was

enormously patient and thorough. Now for weeks he had merely been waiting for death. At last, it was in sight; in another five or six hours, it might be there, before him.

Did he want to die? Was death now the only action left to his mind to see?

That was what she had felt, when she saw him in prison. The details of that visit — the scene, the atmosphere, the circumstances that belonged to prison and not to him — had vanished. They made small impression on her at the time, so absorbed was her entire consciousness in the fact that she was going to see him. She literally did not notice the gates, the passages, the keys, the warders. She saw nothing then, she remembered nothing now, but Harold's face.

He had not asked to see her; she had gone because Hughes and everybody else (she did not know who 'everybody' was, but those days had been crowded with people who asked her things and told her things, all in and out in a dense confusion) took it for granted that she would go; and, mechanically, she did what she was told to do. On her way along the passage, with its glazed tiled walls and stone flooring, on which her feet made such an unnecessarily loud clicking, fear had suddenly seized her with a dreadful grip — fear that he did not want to see her. To think this was to know it true; she was appalled at herself for being there. What Harold would feel about her coming rose up and blotted everything else out. Once, she had had things to say to him: she had, during the night, rehearsed long moving speeches, found poignant words which must convey to him the fact that she cared; that what he had done made no difference (indeed, it did not; even now that had not become real to her); that he was now, always had been, everything to her; that it was because of that she had been so stupid and so cruel on his last leave. Yes — there had been

lots to say — but the whole of it vanished: nothing stayed in her mind but terror. She could no longer think her own thoughts: she could only feel his. And the very worst of her imagination of his was realized, when she saw him.

He was standing with his back to the window; his face, in shadow, seemed a mask, in which the only living points were his eyes. She closed her own, now, involuntarily, as she saw them again. She had no words in which to describe what they had said: could translate her impression of them into no terms of understanding. They were directed to her, but did they see her? Could they come back from their awful journey and adjust their focus so as to take her in? With an effort she held out her hand. Harold took it and dropped it again. His hand was cold, lifeless; he took hers because he would not hurt her feelings by refusing, and because it did not matter to him. For the same reason, his lips moved, in words of greeting, but she heard no sound: there was no sound.

She was terrified: never had she so wanted to turn and run. She felt what one was supposed to feel when one saw a ghost: that rush of uncontrollable, unreasoning fear that froze the mind and set the teeth chattering. It was a hot day, outside, very hot; but her brow was pearly with cold sweat, as though she were going to faint. Yet she must say something.

'Harold — is there anything that I can do?'

His lips moved in what was perhaps meant to be a smile.

'No, oh, no. There's nothing to do.'

His eyes left her face, to which they had been directed, but which she felt sure they had not seen, and fastened somewhere in the dark corner of the small room. She could look at him, now they had moved: notice how thin he was and yet how straight, erect, unbent his shoulders were held.

He stood there, tall, motionless, just as he had stood that afternoon after he had shot Stephen. Then she ought to have said things — the same things she ought to say now — but what were they?

'Harold ——' Why must she keep on saying his name? Was it a fatuous effort to make real to herself that this, after all, was he? 'You do realize, don't you, now, that it was all a horrible mistake? That I never cared for... for anybody but you? That I don't now care for anybody but you?'

Had he heard her? She did not know.

'Harold — do say something to me...'

His eyes came back to her.

'What can I say? There is nothing to say...'

His voice, again; his, and yet not his: far away, toneless, tuneless; the voice of a deaf man, as his eyes were the eyes of a blind man.

'I shall be free...'

She looked at him, quickly: not understanding.

'I shan't have to go back.'

'Oh!' That silly wail of hers echoed in her ears: nay, it broke from her lips, now, as she let her forehead rest again against the edge of the mantelpiece. It had been then, it was now, all she could utter. 'I shan't have to go back.' Abysses opened beneath her feet, as she saw, now, what that meant. Of course he could not speak to her: of course he could not have spoken, when he was home on leave, if that was what it was.

A whole man, the war had taken him wholly to itself. He was it, it was him. Stephen had seen it, had tried to tell her. If only he were here now, he could make her see, help her to think. But he was not here any more; Harold had shot him at the very moment when Stephen was trying to give him back to her. Then she had not understood. She said she

loved him, and it was true; yet she had not understood. The very fact that she thought she knew what war meant had blinded her. She had complacently assumed that her suffering *was* suffering, and so had looked into its authentic face with unrecognizing eyes. She knew now that she knew nothing; only that Harold knew, and, knowing, longed for death; had longed for it, vainly, through all these months: perhaps from the very beginning: even in 1915. Had it not darkened his eyes on his first leave, though she had been unable to see it; closed them against her, against everything on his second leave; and now occupied him altogether? Now, at last, the release he could not give himself was near. The frightfulness of its form, to him, was nothing — he was beyond that.

Darkness descended on her mind. Over an interval she could not measure, a sound broke through, uncertainly. She raised her head. The clock ticked, ruthlessly, above her; but the sound had been louder, surely, than the clock. It stood only at half past twelve, though it seemed to her that hours had passed since she set it. The noise sounded again: not the telephone — the front doorbell. She smoothed back her hair with her hand; put away the duster she was still clutching in the drawer where it belonged; and moved out into the passage, for the bell was now sounding for the third time, with angry insistence.

Not a telegraph boy, not the laundry man stood before her when she opened the door, but Esther Exton — an exquisite vision in black and white: those same captivating weeds that Roberta had described. She held out her hands, in their marvellous white gloves, and seized Jean's hands in them.

'My dear!' she murmured. 'I felt I had to come. I meant to have done so, long ago.'

Across Jean's mind there darted an impression of Esther as she had last seen her, at Victoria Station, departing to Brighton to recover from twenty-four hours of screaming hysterics. She had taken her to the station, since unless she were taken she would never have got off, and as she saw the last of her tear-stained countenance — she was still sobbing in the railway compartment, gravely embarrassing the red-faced Anglo-Indian who was its only other occupant — she had smiled to herself in recognition of the completeness with which Esther knew how to occupy the centre of the stage.

'I couldn't bear the thought that you were here, alone, and perhaps thinking hard thoughts of me.'

Jean muttered something which might conceal the fact that Esther had been far from her thoughts, and led the way into the studio. There, Esther looked about her with her bright, blank, unseeing eyes, and selected a chair, a high straight chair that Roberta used for sitters near to the window, but turned so that her back was to it. In her soft black draperies, with the graceful white tulle arrangements round her face, and her pearls repeating the colour note of veil and gloves, she certainly looked very picturesque. Poor Claude! That his death should have translated itself into an opportunity for very becoming mourning was appropriate enough. He could not see the mourning, but he had been married to Esther for eight years, so he knew. It was all, for her, that was left of him. But what had Esther come for? There were questions, awkward questions, in plenty that she might put, but of course Esther had come to speak, not to hear.

'I have been so unhappy since yesterday. You weren't there, I know. But you've read about it, I expect?' She did not wait to hear whether she had or no, but went on, over a long, deep sigh. 'I can't ask him to forgive me — so I have

come to you. I lay awake the whole night — but literally, the whole night: not one single wink of sleep — trying to make up my mind. And in the morning, it was quite clear. I *ought* to come, whatever it cost me. So, here I am. Appealing to you... I shan't see him ever again. But you will. Before...' she hesitated, 'before the end.'

'The end' — a good phrase, that. Yes, exactly right. Esther had a happy gift with phrases, always. But what was she at?

'You see, I simply can't face life without it. No, really. You may think it funny — but I can't. I must have his forgiveness. Otherwise, I shall reproach myself, always.'

She paused; Jean merely looked at her, fascinated by the flawless surface of her complexion and the perfect art with which she applied powder and rouge. Esther really knew how to do it — it was a pity that so few people did... But now she was talking again.

'I did it, you see. I brought him back. I told him where you were. Now, of course, I see that I ought to have kept him, at least till I had got through to you to warn you: to have invented some clever story. But seeing him so suddenly, when I didn't expect him in the least, put all that out of my head. I forgot about you and Stephen. I could think of nothing but *his* being there. My head just went round and round. I loved him, you see.' Her voice dropped. 'That's why he must forgive me.'

Love — forgiveness — what was all this nonsense? This atrocious parody of the things she had thought of saying to Harold? Why did she not feel angry with Esther? After all, she had 'done it,' as she said; she was morally responsible for Stephen's death, and for the fact that it was Harold who had killed him. She did not know — and it did not matter. Even Stephen's death did not matter. Nor was there any

reality in talk about responsibility: Esther's responsibility. Those phrases did not belong, here, any more. Nor did anger. It was irrelevant. At another time she might have felt, not anger, but a bitter ironic amusement at Esther's passion for playing Isolde to any — or no — Tristan: not now.

Something of what was passing in her mind must have been reflected in her face, for Esther got up and came across to her where she stood looking out of the window, down into the street — though with no realization of what she was looking at — and, laying a hand on her arm, exclaimed in a tone of genuine concern:

'Jean — what is it? Don't look like that — you frighten me. Listen — Harold never cared for me, if that's what you're thinking. I pretended to myself that he did — but... he didn't. He never even answered my letters: when he came that day, I don't believe he even saw me. He came to Clarges Street because you were there, not because I was. Jean — you do believe me, don't you?'

'Yes, yes, I believe you,' said Jean quickly. Then, with a softening of her voice — after all, it was a sign of real grace in Esther to have admitted this, and it might hurt her to have her taking it entirely for granted — 'Indeed, I do believe you, and it's nice of you to say so. But do tell me, why did you write to him?'

Under Esther's powder she could see the colour rising. Stephen had said that Esther could not blush — but he was wrong.

'I don't know,' she said slowly. 'No — that's not true. I wanted to write; that was all. I just wanted to. And I had to write about something. And, after all, I thought it was over between you, so far as you were concerned. Are you still in love with Stephen? Is that why you look so un-

happy? He really wasn't worth it, you know. Claude, poor dear, was right about him, in the end. He was a horrible person.'

'Oh, no... indeed, I never was.'

Esther stared incredulously, but Jean proffered no more.

'But you will explain to Harold, if you get a chance, won't you?'

'Explain? What?'

'Why I did it — because I loved him —— And that I'm terribly sorry, and he must forgive me.'

Jean nodded. Again, the caricature of herself was painfully present to her. Her thoughts were broken by a little shriek from Esther. She was preparing to go — no doubt she was on the way to a lunch engagement — and, looking about the walls in search of a mirror, her eye had been caught by the drawings above the sofa.

'Oh, Jean! How appalling! How like that Miss Darsy to leave them there. She must be the most insensitive creature: how can you bear to live with her? I never did like her. Those two, side by side. For everybody who comes in to see. Too awful...' She covered her eyes.

'Oh, as to that — most people see nothing at all.'

'But — for you...'

'Well — it isn't as if removing them from the wall would remove them from my mind? Is it?'

Esther looked at her on this, with a puzzled expression.

'I never could quite make you out, Jean. I don't now. Well, I must run,' she gave a nervous glance at the clock. 'I'm late already. The news is shocking, isn't it? I'm told the French are down and out, and this last push — which has been appallingly expensive — is only to keep them from

giving in altogether: isn't it ghastly? However, now America is in, it's only a question of time. You'll remember your promise, won't you? If you get a chance?'

Easy to promise: Jean would have promised more than this to ensure her departure.

Somehow or other the time passed. When she looked at the clock, the hands never seemed to have moved, but they did move: the ticking did register a passing of the endless seconds that made up a minute, the endless minutes that made up an hour. Once, twice, the telephone rang between three and four; each time it was nothing — a wrong number once, and once someone for Berta who would leave neither name nor message, but would ring up again. Funny, that: it suggested that there were people, incidents, in her friend's life of which she knew nothing. No doubt there were: there was more in the life of any individual than any friend, however intimate, really knew; even in Berta's, which looked so clear and simple. Her mind could not stay on this, or on anything else. She merely waited. The power to order words or sounds or images in sequences had gone from her. At one moment she longed for her piano; at the next she knew that, even had she had it there, she could not have played upon it. She could only listen for the telephone. When one really listened, what a mass of distinct sounds one could catch, coming out clear, like separate instruments, against the richly orchestrated background of London! It seemed quiet in the studio, until one listened, but, as soon as one did listen, the air was thick with multitudinous, diversified noise. Trams — a long way off; a heavy lorry; taxis rushing by, hooting intermittently; hammering somewhere down the road; typewriters clicking, below and above; a telephone, somewhere in the building; and, mixed in and out

of them, the throbbing in her throat which she could not swallow down — 'Harold, Harold, Harold,' it thrummed.

Nearly five o'clock. At last, the telephone... Berta. At first agonizingly indistinct: then quite clear, her natural voice.

'Jean? Berta here. Do you remember what I said to you this morning? Well — he is acquitted. Yes, acquitted — acquitted. Not guilty. Free. The jury were out under fifty minutes. There's the most awful pandemonium going on now: the crowd is wild with delight: they're all for him. The Judge summed up dead against him: I thought there was no chance. But Eden did it: I loathed his speech, and you would have been quite sick. But he did it. Eden — and the war. He was all on that. I don't know what happens now. Are you there? It will take some time for anyone to get out: there are yelling crowds in the streets, too — I can hardly hear myself speak. Oh, he's a popular hero. I can't take it all in yet. As for you, I don't know what to think. I shan't be back till lateish: anyhow, don't pay any attention if I do come in, unless you want me. Right. So long!'

Acquitted! It was over and he was acquitted. Jean hung up the receiver, but held the instrument still in her hand, as though its shape and construction had never struck her before. Odd, that nearly all the things in common use had got to be so ugly. The surface of her mind reflected the shiny black image of the telephone — its graceless curves and unyielding, unassimilable design. She looked at it, and felt nothing. What should one feel? What did a wife feel when her husband was acquitted of murder? She did not know, and anyhow to know would not have helped her. Murder — that huge, important, terrible, death-dealing word — seemed now, had always seemed, irrelevant here. What

overpowered every other sensation was the knowledge that Harold, who longed for death, was by this acquittal condemned to life: condemned to go back there. 'I shan't have to go back.' 'I shall be free.' Free — and Berta now said he was free! What she felt she did not know — nor did it signify: it shrivelled to nothing against the dread vision of what he was feeling. She pictured him in the midst of the deliriously rejoicing mob Berta had described, and the irony of it was unendurable.

Outside a clock struck. She raised her head, which had been resting against the back of the chair, to listen, count the strokes, and found she was still clutching the telephone with one hand, still held it on her lap. Four feeble strokes — the hour. Then one after the other six slow, heaving booms. Six. It couldn't be six. She looked at the clock; five minutes to six; then at her watch, by which she had set it — the same. Yes, it was six. Nearly an hour had disappeared into the unlit blackness of her futile thoughts of Harold...

Outside, it was growing dark. The window behind her was passing from grey to blue. She got up and replaced the telephone carefully on the small table where it lived. It was cold now: the air that came in through the open window had a knife-like edge. Or was that the coldness within her mind? Perhaps it was; perhaps she was feeling something after all, and this queer physical sensation was it. She shivered. Whether or no, she was exceedingly cold — and so would Berta be when she got back. Where was she, anyhow? As she knelt before the fire, watching it light up, she recalled what Berta had said about not coming back lest she should break in on her and Harold. Poor darling Berta! How little, even after their talk and after two days of the Old Bailey, she knew about it. Perhaps the Old Bailey kept her ignorant: it was not there that the hard truth of the Clavi-

ger case was to be found or looked for. For the Old Bailey nothing was real but the murder. She stared into the flames: leaping up royally now, casting fantastic lights about the studio... and mechanically took her cigarette case out of her pocket. It was empty — she had smoked them all, without noticing that she had smoked any.

Outside, it grew darker: quite dark. Somewhere in that darkness, Harold. Alone, refused release, thrown back upon himself. She sprang to her feet with a hasty movement that sent the fire-irons clattering: on an impulse to go to his aid that died as it was born, so irrational was it. He did not want her aid; and had she any aid to give?

The door opened, letting in a shaft of light. Roberta stood framed in the bright square; she had evidently been in for some time, for her hat was off and she was in her indoor dress.

'Why, Jean — I thought you must have gone out, it was so quiet. I've been back some time, and changed; it's nearly seven. I must draw the curtains — the fire makes quite a brilliant light from outside, and the police about here are very fussy. Have you been here all the time?'

Jean nodded.

'By yourself?'

She nodded again. 'Yes — quite. Oh, I had a visit from Esther, of all people, in the morning — hours before you rang up. She came to ask me to beg Harold to forgive her before his execution. She evidently counted on that — though she didn't call it that, of course... Where is he, Berta?'

'I don't know. I thought he'd be here.'

'Here? Oh, no.'

'You didn't ever expect him?'

'No, no, I told you so.'

'I know, but I didn't believe you, then...'

'Well, you ought to have done. I meant it. And what do you mean by "then" — has anything happened?'

The quick, almost hopeful lift in her voice compelled Roberta to answer instantly, 'No, not really... Only, this afternoon, sitting there, listening to Eden, I suddenly felt that I had been all wrong on that. You see, Eden's whole case is that you and Stephen were lovers — he was tremendous, on that.'

'Yes,' said Jean drily. 'He would be, of course.' Then, glancing at Roberta, seeing the tension of her countenance, she added, with something that might have been called a smile, 'We weren't, you know.'

'I didn't know — I ought to have, perhaps: but I didn't.'

'You thought — even you — that I was in love... with Stephen?'

'I didn't always think so — indeed, I mostly didn't know what to think; but in the end I always came back to that. Weren't you, ever?'

'No, never.' Her tone was vague, unemphatic; it suggested that this aspect of the case hardly interested her. Then, looking up, 'You think Harold thought so?'

'Yes. He must. Else why...?' Her voice tailed off.

'Why?' Jean took it up. 'That's the point I simply cannot get my mind fixed onto: I never seem able to think about that: I don't see it. Or, rather, I do: I see it in action. But I can't take it in. But did you, after Eden, still expect to find him here? You did?'

'I suppose I hoped so...'

'Yes. It's odd. Does that mean you don't see Stephen — Stephen's having been killed by him — as really important?'

'Perhaps. It's awful — but I expect that is so. That's the war. Why fuss about one murder? But surely Harold must. If *he* thinks you cared for Stephen...'

'But he doesn't. I told him so.'

Roberta's expression did not suggest any finality in that. And indeed there was none. Had he taken it in? If his mind had once taken hold of the idea that she did care for Stephen, that she and Stephen had been lovers, it would need more than a half word from her to dislodge it. At any time, his mental processes were slow, difficult, and, once accomplished, terribly tenacious. It had taken him three months to decide to go into the army. Once decided, Stephen's arguments had flowed over him like water. With this, it would be the same. Once accepted, it would lie in his mind as a fact; and his respect for facts was appalling. It would stay there long after it had lost what she called any meaning: it might survive the death of his affection...

Roberta was speaking again:

'And you must remember, Jean, that you weren't there; you didn't hear the case. To-day it was all on that.'

Jean looked up, her eyes bright with question.

'On a husband's protecting his wife,' Roberta explained.

'Oh — that...'

'Yes, it seems fustian to you. And to me. But — that was what did it: he got acquitted on that. That and, of course, the war... And Eden invented a struggle.'

'Struggle? What nonsense. Did anyone believe that?'

'I dare say not. The other thing — wife-stealing — counted far more. I suppose Harold isn't like us on that, is he? Modern, I mean? He still has the old ideas...?'

'Stacks of them. Yes — you mean he might feel outraged by Stephen, even after he had ceased to care for me? Yes, he might. Old ideas have an awful way of living on. Eden's moral geography comes in there. And his father: yes: the old man would shoot me now with pleasure, I've no doubt. Yes: I forget him, but he *is* his father after all...'

'They have the same ears,' said Roberta thoughtfully.

'Oh, Berta, how awful!'

'But, you know, Jean, where I'm sure you're wrong is in saying Harold doesn't care for you any more. I'm positive he does, though he may not know it at the moment.'

Jean looked at her. She did not speak; she did not even shake her head. But her eyes made Roberta feel that, on this line, talk from her was waste of time.

The whirr of the telephone sounded. Jean indicated by a movement of her head that Roberta should answer it.

'Yes... No; this is Miss Darsy speaking... Yes...'

Listening still, she put a hand over the receiver. 'Central News — after you: I haven't said you're here...'

'I'm not.'

'And they don't know where he is... Yes' (she was speaking on the instrument again)... 'I'm sorry I can't help you ... Oh, that would be very kind. Yes.'

She hung up the receiver.

'It seems that the news from France is perfectly awful, so they're keen to make as much of a counter-attraction out of Harold as they can. He seemed a nice friendly creature: I felt quite uncomfortable pretending to know nothing about you — they're dead keen now to get a picture of you, or a statement. I could make a nice little sum, if I liked. Hullo, there he is again... Yes? Oh, yes — well, after all, that's natural... Thank you very much... I'm so sorry to be no use to you.' She rang off. For a moment she seemed to hesitate; then, in response to Jean's eyes, she continued:

'He says that a message has just come through that Harold has gone to Bluehills with his father. He was anxious to know if you'd gone too.'

Jean got up, walked once, twice, up and down the studio. When she came back to the fire, however, all she said was:

'We'd better have something to eat. There's a sort of vacancy in me that may be hunger — and you must be hungry.'

At supper, she said little, and what she said had nothing to do with her thoughts, or Roberta's. Roberta asked her no questions; if Jean wanted to talk she would, and if not, not. They were drinking their coffee when Jean, her elbows on the table, and her chin cupped between her hands, leaned across and said:

'Berta — I want your advice. The time has come when all my thinking, this way and that, is obviously no good. I've got to do something. Just feeling sorry for Harold is no use — less than no use. Seeing what is happening to him is no use either...'

She paused.

'What is happening to him?' asked Roberta. 'I don't know.'

'No. And, fully, I don't either. But I see enough, because in degree it's happening to me, too. I'm going bad — corrupting, as meat does, if you leave it in a dark cupboard.'

'Oh, Jean, don't...'

'But it's true. It's happening. To all of us. Harold's cupboard is infinitely worse than mine: he's going bad, too: oh, yes, Berta, he is. That's what suffering, too much of it, does to you. I know: I know what might have happened to me when the baby died but for him; and when father died. He's had no one — I've not been there: I've made everything worse. He is going bad. Literally. The things in him that belong to his father are coming up through the real him which he's made for himself...'

'Do you hate them?'

'The things? Oh, yes.'

'But — not Harold?'

'I'm weak — I resent the pain he causes me, the more that when he hurts me it isn't at all because he wants to. I doubt whether he'll ever be able to stop doing that. But all that — it's nothing. It's not real between him and me. One hates one's self at times; I hate him like that. But now the question is, What am I to *do?* In other words, am I to go after him, to Bluehills?'

'Oh, Jean, you couldn't.'

Jean looked at her.

'I'm afraid, you mean? Yes. I am, desperately. But what of? Of hurting him, or myself? He doesn't want me: I know that. Ought I to leave him alone?'

Roberta looked at her, feeling more ignorant and helpless than she had ever done in her life. But Jean was waiting; she had to say something.

'Honestly, I don't know what to say. I feel I know nothing about it; about anything. I don't know whether I'm naturally what you'd call cold, but I have always had an instinct to keep away from fires. You won't remember Carrell — in Edinburgh: but I was glad when he was transferred to South Africa because it settled things for me: something was coming to life in me that I didn't understand, and instead of dealing with it I drifted — and when he went without anything having happened, I felt rather dull but also rather relieved. There are lots of people like me, really: some married, some not — it's a low emotional vitality, I suppose — a torpid heart. Not cold: coldness is positive and may be very active. Just torpid. I don't know why I'm saying this, why it has all come up now. It's only by way of saying I don't know whether you ought to leave Harold alone or not. I should, of course. But then I should never have got so far as there being a Harold. So I'm useless. I don't know what to say. I really don't. I'd like to help you:

there's nothing I want more; but you couldn't have a more useless friend.'

'Nonsense,' said Jean, with a return of her normal sharpness of tone — that sudden, decisive ring in her voice which every now and then showed the strength that lived behind her gentleness of mien. 'No one is useless to whom one can really talk. I can't go anyhow to-night — there's no train. And perhaps I'd better leave them twenty-four hours to themselves. I could send a wire — then they could tell me not to, if they wanted. "They" will want to, of course: I mean Harold.'

Roberta looked at her again. Courage — yes, this was real courage; for her face was blanched with fear and the pain in her eyes was terrible.

'You're going?'

'Yes, I'm going.'

CHAPTER VII

I

ROBERTA saw her off at Euston next morning by the early train: a train which, even allowing for the longer time the journey now occupied, would get her to Bluehills in time for tea. They talked merely of practical matters: Jean took only a suitcase; her trunk could wait, could be sent after her if she wanted it. No telegram had come in reply to the one sent off last night: if one came during the day, Roberta was to send it on to her, care of the station-master at Bluehills.

'I'll ask him when I get there — and if the worst comes to the worst, Zillpah Dalton will put me up for the night. I can't get back till the morning.'

'Who is Zillpah Dalton?' Roberta had asked, as she stood at the carriage window; more, they both knew, for the sake of making conversation than because she really wanted to know about her.

'Oh, Zillpah works in the mill; she's a remarkable creature, really: very quiet, but lots of character. She's got a little girl who is called after me, as it happens, or partly after me — Liza Jean: a perfect pet. Jimmy Dalton is in France. He's not Liza Jean's father: Mr. Claviger is her father.'

Roberta stared. 'Your father-in-law?' she asked, incredulous.

Jean grinned. 'Yes: it sounds lurid, doesn't it? That's Bluehills all over — the fact, and that they take it for granted. They take an awful lot for granted there.'

'So it seems. Does everybody know he's her father?'

'Well, Jimmy does, of course. And so, I suppose (I never thought of it before, which shows how Bluehillian one can get), do most of the people in the mill where she works — it's one of ours. They know, too, that she's not the only one, by any means. Oh, it's a nice place...'

'You horrify me, though. I had no idea he was... like that. I don't think you really ought to be going back.'

'Oh, I'm safe enough. He wouldn't touch anything of Harold's. Besides, I'm not afraid of him, now. I was, once, at the beginning. Not of that side of him: simply of his temper: the noise of his voice set my nerves jangling. I really want to see Zillpah again. You'd want to draw her, Berta: she's like a little Madonna.'

'I thought they were all plain up there.'

'Oh, no. There are plenty of very pretty girls in the mills. The men are apt to be undersized. And many of them go deaf, from the noise of the machinery. But they're not bad-looking, and they often sing quite beautifully. You'll really have to come and look. Hallo, we're off.'

Berta held her hand and squeezed it hard as she leaned out of the window. 'You will write, won't you?'

'Oh, yes. And you, too. I'm not trying to say any Thank-you's, Berta: it's much, much beyond that. No, don't look so wae: I shall be all right. Anyhow, there won't be any air raids. And if you see Mr. Eden, tell him I'm deeply grateful to him. That'll puzzle him to death. Good-bye.'

She glanced round the compartment before opening her newspaper. Wonderful — there was nobody in it she knew. Thursday was not a favourite day, nor was this a favourite train, since one had to change twice. But it was lucky. The man in the corner farthest from her was, she felt sure, a member of the Bluehills Council, but he evidently did not

recognize her, and she could not recall his name; and anyhow he was deep in his paper — 'The Times' — reading the Claviger case. How amused he would be if he knew! But unless he had heard her mention the name of Eden — and that was not likely: her head had been far out of the carriage window when she did that: indeed, throughout her conversation with Berta — he certainly would not suspect the quiet-looking young woman in black silk coat and small black hat pulled on well over her face of any such loud connections. Roberta had insisted on buying her two pink carnations for her buttonhole, saying, 'You look like a widow in that black'; she did not feel like carnations, but it was nice of her and helped to hide Mrs. Claviger. Besides, they served as a flag. She wanted to hoist one, was determined to do so, for her own sake.

If only being sorry for Harold did not so devastate her mind. It sounded so simple — 'I'm so sorry for you,' people said, and it evaporated in the words. Her sorrow was not like that: it was an oppression in her chest, a block lying on her heart that made its beating laboured, a weight on all her limbs, a complete obstruction in her brain. There seemed no part of her anatomy that did not feel it, or that felt anything else. She was not sleepy, although she had not slept: or hungry, although she had not succeeded, even to please Roberta, in swallowing more at breakfast than half a cup of coffee; or tired; or hot; or cold. She had no headache. She only felt sorry. It came over her in waves, and they submerged her.

They submerged Harold, too. She could not visualize him: she got no nearer to imagining his mind than she had done last night. She had spoken to Roberta about a telegram. There would be no telegram. She had only to recall Harold in prison to know that. Then he had taken her hand,

because, while to take it or not to take it made no difference to him, to refuse would have been rude: and by rudeness he would not hurt her, even while he drove a sword through her heart by his aloofness. So, too, he would not now tell her not to come. He did not mind whether she came or not. There would have been more hope for her if he had wired back: 'Can't see you.' He could: it made no difference to him.

Of her he did not think. That was plain. She spoke and he did not hear. She looked at him, and he did not see. If she had forgotten — in the fatal spring and summer of 1917 — what he was like, he, too, had forgotten what she was like; he had thought Stephen had been her lover. Perhaps he thought so still. Thinking that, he had shot him, because, although he no longer cared for her, she was still his wife, and he retained enough of the conventional outlook of his family to feel his sense of possession outraged. Yes — that must be so. She must not idealize him and so distort. Had not her father said to her, long ago, 'Don't idealize him too much; it usually makes one hard on a person, to do that.' How far did his conventionality go? Did he think a wife should shrink from a husband who committed murder? One might be very unconventional and still feel that. Not nowadays, though. Nowadays murder was lawful, even glorious. Wives loved their murderer-husbands the more, the more heads they hung at their belts. Had not Agnes, the gentle Agnes Lorbeer, told her with pride that Arthur — gentler, at heart, even, than Agnes — had killed seven Germans? And had not her mild blue eyes sparkled with pride as she did so? Yes: that was true. That was how Stephen would have put it. But — would Harold? Would he not think that to kill a German was one thing and to kill a friend another? She did not know: the answer was lost in the dark maze of his war experiences; of the circumstances that had

twisted into a murderer, both private and professional, a creature naturally sensitive to excess to the feelings of others, kind to a fault, notably unselfish. That twist carried on and on, much farther than she could follow it, and lost itself in sorrow.

As the train entered on its crawling latter stage and only some fifteen miles, if as many stations, separated her from Bluehills, emotion was obliterated in sheer stage fright. She had heard people talking of the solar plexus and only got a vague apprehension of what they meant: but now she seemed to know, for what she imagined to be that region of her anatomy appeared to be engaged in an act of dissolving and sinking that absorbed her entire consciousness. Sometimes, when lying in bed, she had felt as though the mattress were falling, falling down into an endless, formless void and drawing her with it; now, she herself, her own body, was being assimilated to the void, and the process of atomization and evaporation left her almost without a mind. One could not call it pain: it had too little outline. Pain left some sense of one's self as feeling it; this dissolving sensation was all there was of her. She could only sit, fingering her bag, now and then pressing the window-sill with her elbow to make sure that she was still solid, not a disintegrating wraith. She looked at the other occupants of the carriage — two men, she guessed miners, undersized, black, elderly; three youths in khaki; two giggling girls — but did not see them; she stared out of the window at the familiar countryside under the familiar pall of rain and smoke, with its special clamminess of air that in these regions was the mark of autumn, but did not see it. She saw nothing; she thought nothing.

The train hardly seemed to move: somewhere, war might mean a fevered intensity of motion and feeling; but its pervading accent at home was one of meaningless and intoler-

able protraction. One had got into a vast slow-motion film that went on and on; journeys took longer; the whole thing was a train that never arrived.

Station after station. Some people got out; more people got in; the train dragged on, now through a phantasmagoria of chimneys and low-browed houses round them, here and there a dark line of water, a couple of blasted and withering fields, a fragmentary tree or two, but, in the main, black brick, cowering under the black pall of smoke and rain. She stared at it; it meant nothing to her.

At last Bluehills. The dingy platform was even more sparsely lit than usual. Bluehills, though a terminus, had none of the dignity proper to that fact: trains, there, arrived and departed in a furtive, unnoticed fashion; there were no porters visible; nobody waiting. There never was; no one ever met anyone there; people hurried out, carrying any luggage they happened to have, along the extensive platform, through the vault-like subterranean passages, up the clammy stairs, and so out through the barriers where tickets were collected. She was borne along, with the throng; no one in it she knew or who knew her; even the collector at the barrier was a new man who looked at her blankly. The other two, who had been at Bluehills ever since she had known it, had both gone into the army, and one of them had already been killed, at Loos. She passed through the barrier awkwardly, catching the edge of her suitcase, so that she stumbled. She would have fallen, but that there was a hand outstretched to take her bag from her, and another to catch her neatly under the elbow, steadying her.

She looked up with a grateful smile, straight into Harold's face.

'Oh!' she gasped, and again, 'Oh!' — stupidly. 'How wonderful of you to be here!'

No answering smile there: his face was set in the rigid carven lines of the day in the prison; behind his eyes the lights had gone out.

'I've got the car,' he said; his voice seemed to come to her from very far off.

She followed him out of the station into the yard. As they passed out, a man in a cap and shabby, shapeless clothes — the clothes of a workman, not made for him — got somehow mixed up with them. She heard the man mumbling:

'Captain Claviger — I just want to say I'm that glad to see you free...'

Then 'Thank you: very kind of you'; and they were out in the air. Harold opened the door of the car for her to get in, threw her bag in behind, and shutting the door clambered in on the other side and took the wheel. Mechanically she watched him negotiating the traffic — very thick at that time of day — steering across the network of roads at the station and so out onto the northern branch road; her eyes, fixed at first on the road, gradually moved and rested on his hands. At his face she could not look again, yet. He had no gloves on: he never wore gloves; under the sleeves of his old leather coat she could see the rim of his blue serge suit, on the wrist nearest her, his luminous-faced wrist watch; then his hands — large, strong, the bones clearly defined the whole way down from knuckle to wrist, and the long, strong, square-ended fingers. Strangely white, both hands and fingers: whiter than they used to be, surely: a bleached edition of the brown hands she remembered. Bleached — yes: bleached by five, six weeks in prison. There was nothing he could not do with those hands. Nothing he could not do — but for weeks now nothing he had been allowed to do.

She could not speak: she could not even look up at his

face — safe though it was with his eyes on the road. When at last she did look, it was after a straining effort, as though she were heaving a weight almost beyond her strength. His profile was to her, as stern and still as though cast in metal. His cap, low over his brow, hid both hair and eyes from her. She could only see the short straight line of his nose, and below it his mouth and chin. That strong chin might have looked cruel — but even to her it did not do that; it looked simply beautiful: beautiful, as of old; sad, terribly sad.

What was it about Harold that made speech impossible? She had come, determined to take hold, to act, to be herself, to set her living mind against his tortured, dead one: she was not going to fall again into the limp misery of December, 1915, or January, 1917. Yet, here she was, dropping back into precisely that jellified state of raw sensitiveness that had been her undoing before. To look at him, at his averted profile, made her heart bleed. Here he was; he had come, himself, to meet her; and that not at a safe London station, but at Bluehills, where everyone knew who he was and who she was, although, thank God, being Lancashire, they would not 'let on.' That meant something. Not much, perhaps: no more, indeed, than his good manners, which would survive everything — as good manners did, if as deeply rooted in gracious feeling as were his. By now the chauffeur had probably gone, and so there were only Harold and Mr. Claviger available to drive the car. Even so — he had come. Let her not belittle it. Were her manners to be worse than his? He had found an action; for her, manners must take the more difficult form of words. He could not speak, but she must. What words could she find? She could summon none, save those horribly heavy sentences that crashed into the real things between them. And this was no time for such. What, however, did it matter what words she used? Something

must be said. For her own sake, she must break down this bar of silence.

'Harold ——' He heard: she saw his eyelashes quiver. 'Thank you so much... for coming to meet me. It was very ... generous of you... I... It means a lot, to me...'

They were almost at Claviger House. The next opening was its entrance. Dare she follow up her words by laying a hand on his arm? No, it was not fair. He swung the car round the rhododendrons with his usual dexterity: Mr. Claviger nearly always grazed the bushes, Harold, never. They were there.

The door opened, and Cassie stood in the hall; it was nearly dark, but there were no lights as yet in the house.

'Train late as usual?' she remarked, as Jean got out and came towards her. She did not offer a hand or seem either to expect, or inclined to make, any greeting, although they had not seen each other since January. All she said was that tea was ready, and her tone, on this, was the one she would have used if Jean had only left that morning. Harold, having extracted her bag from the back of the car, resumed his seat at the wheel to go round into the garage. She followed Cassie into the house. The parlour door was half open; Cassie, who had taken the bag, paused:

'Will you come straight in, or up to your room first?'

She hesitated: Cassie, rather to her surprise, moved towards the stairs. As she still paused, Cassie looked back.

'I'd go up first, if I were you.' She went on ahead, up the two short flights and then straight through the sitting-room into the bedroom. It looked desolate, unoccupied, chilly. There, depositing the bag on a chair, she stood, as if waiting: as if there were something she wanted to say, but could not bring out. Aware of her still there, Jean raised her eyes from their contemplation of the vacant dressing-table to the mir-

ror above it, and saw on Cassie's reflected image a curious expression, almost of compassion. Turning quickly round, she caught her hands in hers.

'You haven't kissed me, Cassie.'

Cassie started; turned brusquely away.

'Surely you don't expect me to.'

'But, Cassie, why not?'

They stared at one another.

'Cassie, explain. Are you angry with me?'

'I expect you couldn't help it. I don't understand any of that, of course. You're pretty...'

'What on earth are you talking about? No, you must explain. Are the others angry, too? Is that why you didn't want me to go in?'

'Of course. What did you expect?' Cassie's words now came fast, with unusual energy, as if they represented something long bottled up. 'You've done this to Harold. How you can come here! I don't understand. I tried at first to take your part, but I can't argue: I know nothing. Only, you were always so nice to me, I couldn't believe it. But, between you and Harold, I must be on Harold's side, mustn't I?'

'Yes, yes. Yes, indeed, Cassie. Of course you must. If there is a side, of course —— Really there isn't. Look here, Cassie, don't cry. No, really, don't. It *is* terrible, but not in the way you think. But now, tell me this —— They didn't want me to come?'

Cassie wiped her eyes.

'No, of course they didn't. There was a shocking scene when he told us you were coming.'

'Yes?'

'Father fell into one of his rages: said the most awful things.'

'And Harold? What did he say?'

'Oh, he didn't say anything for a long time — then he turned to Mother. And she said you should be allowed to come.'

'He didn't say anything himself?'

'No.'

The hope that had leaped up died. 'It was Mother's doing?'

'Yes.'

'I wonder why. Did she think Harold wanted it?'

'I don't know. He didn't seem to care. He doesn't, you know. She likes going against Father when she can. And I don't know: she's so queer; perhaps she thought it would be a punishment for you. To come. To face Father. You know... she's only had me between her and Father all year, And these last weeks — awful. Though he was in London, of course. But she was raving when she thought Harold was going to be... that she wouldn't see him again.'

'Oh, Cassie... I'm so sorry. I ought never to have left you. It might never have happened if I'd stayed here.'

Cassie looked at her. 'It's funny. Now you are here — it seems so unreal. You — you are not what I thought of you. You're... just as you were.'

'Yes, I am. But I'll tell you about that later. Now we must go down to tea.'

'You wouldn't like me to bring it up?'

She smiled and laid a hand on Cassie's shoulder.

'Oh, no. I mustn't start by being frightened and running away. I'll come down with you now. Really, it's rather amusing being in disgrace. You'll be horrified, but I never thought of that.'

Cassie's face was a study in bewilderment.

Jean gave a final look round. 'Where is Harold sleeping, Cassie?'

'Oh, in George's old room. Last night, anyhow. I put his things in here when he came, but he moved them.'

Of course. She had known that his letting her come was formidable; it implied a reliance on his part on his power to withdraw, to resist contact, to refuse speech, to deny communication, that was frightening: a negative will that had complete confidence in itself. If he had said 'No,' there would have been something on which to build, some ally within to help her, some lingering relic of feeling on which she could count. As it was, she was up against the glass wall that had maddened her — yes, literally — in January. She stood still in the middle of the room, looking at it. It was going to be harder than she had thought. But she was for it, now.

Tea, for her ill-regulated mind, had its moments of ironic enjoyment. Mr. Claviger's feelings about her, she saw at once, were such as could have found adequate relief only in physical violence: he would have liked to throw her cup of tea in her face, break her egg against it, and take his two hands to her throat when she spoke. His emotions had nothing subtle or secret ever, and nothing in him was silent. Reprobation of her and her immorality breathed from him. This, from him, struck her almost at once as so funny that she felt an inclination to draw him on. And it helped her to steel herself against her awareness of Harold, sitting on the other side of the table, silent; when she was not alone with him, she could, she found, still talk, and, she hoped, hide her physical difficulty in eating and drinking and her mental difficulty in forming a coherent sentence. His mother, sitting by him, never moved her eyes from his face. She had greeted Jean on her entry to the dining-room with a faint dry kindliness, a sort of waft of chilly Christian charity. Forgiving a sinner was part of her code — and one, poor woman, which

she had had ample opportunity to practise. Jean felt she was now classed with Mr. Claviger as an opportunity for the exercise of religious virtue. One's mind was a queer thing: in some obscure chamber of hers was room for amusement in the division of the party into two camps by Mrs. Claviger's attitude: she seemed to count for so little, and yet it was she who did this — placed herself and her son on one side, her husband and her daughter-in-law on the other. Cassie, of course, for Mrs. Claviger, never counted as a person. Despite his ebullient disapproval, or because of it, Mr. Claviger and she were the two sinners, the two who talked. A queer alliance. For the fact that he did talk she was, in the end, really grateful to him. He talked: he talked at her so loudly and persistently that she was able in the end to collect enough self-command to reply. But the thing was a nightmare — for Harold was there, and yet — as in the car — not there. There he was, on the other side of the table from her, part of a group that, had a stranger suddenly entered, would have seemed to him simply a typical middle-class English family at their evening meal. The light above the table, with its deep red shade, at once cast a sort of warm glow over the faces of the company — even Harold's no longer wore that dreadful greyish hue — and cut them off, an island of light, from the rest of the room, which was plunged in darkness. Except Cassie, whom no one would have noticed, they were nice-looking people — the two men exceptionally so; Mrs. Claviger had taken to a cap, which gave her small white face with its vivid blue eyes a positively saint-like expression; and the bowl of late sweet peas in the centre of the table lent it an almost festive air.

A ring at the bell took Cassie to the door: she returned, bearing in her hand the evening paper, which she handed to her father, and a letter for Harold.

Mr. Claviger opened the paper.

'Hm... bad news,' he snorted. 'Nothing else nowadays... These Russians are letting us down... And the Yanks are only talk so far. The Government takes all our men, but doesn't seem able to do anything with them but shove them against machine guns. My God, I am fair tired of them all ... But in London I suppose you enjoy it?'

'Some people do — I don't.'

'Fancy that! I should have thought you did. But people do, it seems.'

'Yes.' Cassie suddenly interposed. 'Even in Bluehills. There's that new Palais de Danse opened...'

Mr. Claviger glared.

'Dancing, yes: I suppose you're a great dancer?'

Jean smiled. 'No: I'm not that either. I used to dance ... with Harold.'

Harold did not look up. His eyes were still on the letter he was reading, though as he held its sheet against the light she could see that the lines it contained, all confined within a single paragraph, must have been taken in at a glance.

'Air mail from Paris — that's surely Sir Michael's hand,' said Mrs. Claviger, picking up the envelope. Harold handed her the letter.

'What a wonderful old man he is!' she cried, after a moment.

'He's made a wonderful reputation for himself,' said Mr. Claviger. 'No one has done better for himself than Sir Michael. He'll be a lord before he's done. They can make him one now, too, as it will die with him. Before, they wouldn't have. I never thought of that before, but, Lord, it's funny. You didn't know what a good turn you were doing him, Harold.'

Harold's eyes were raised now: in this topsy-turvy world

everyone did the opposite of what seemed in his character. He looked across at his father with an expression that, for the instant, joined on to his.

'He seems to appreciate it,' was all he said, but she felt a shudder go through her.

He had taken the letter from his mother's hand and was putting it back in its envelope; now he took it out again. Suddenly, he was speaking to her, holding out the letter to her.

'Would you like to see it?' was all he said, but her hand trembled so that she could hardly take it from him, and for a minute the black characters danced in a blur over the white sheet. She took as long to decipher the few lines as he had done. Was this only manners again, or was he demonstrating to his family that his wife was still his wife? It did not matter: he had spoken to her, he had looked at her: indeed, he was, she knew, still looking at her as she read.

HOTEL MEURICE, PARIS
October 12, 1917

DEAR HAROLD,

You will not misinterpret the feelings which prompt me to say that, as an Englishman and a patriot, I rejoice in the verdict of the Court to-day. There was a time when we were unable, to my deep regret, wholly to agree: but now there can be only one attitude — On to victory: let nothing and no one stand in the way.

Yours faithfully
MICHAEL HENSHAW

She looked at him now: his eyes were on the sweet peas.

Sweet peas — what did they remind her of? What did he see when he saw them, smelt them? Purple sweet peas — like these; dark purple, that blue-purple that is almost black: a bowl of them... by the window in Stephen's flat... beyond, the river; all round the murmur of London; behind, colour-

ing everything, the war: Stephen talking about the war and about Harold. 'On to victory.' The light flickered up and down, on and off, before her eyes; the sweet peas seemed to darken, to go brown, to go black. They were not flowers any more: they were leaves, rotting leaves, fallen and lying in great heaps under a pallid sky: a sky like the sky outside Stephen's windows, that afternoon; and, as then, a ray of chilly sunlight came — through trees; for, somehow, she was out of doors now, in a wood, leaning against the bare bole of a tree — and fell full on the purplish brown of the heaped-up leaves. And they took on a ruddy tinge, a tinge of blood, and stirred. Ah, they were not really leaves: they were the dead bodies of uncounted young men, trampled and corrupting at her feet. For miles and miles, those were the leaves with which the soil of Europe was being enriched. She gazed at them, in a mounting terror, seeing here an arm, there a leg, there a mangled, bleeding body, there a smashed and disfigured face. The whole mass surged before her as though these were not corpses, but men still suffering, indescribably, abandoned and deserted in their agony. It was a nightmare, but she could neither look up nor shake it off; she was held by that dark surging mass, from which there now rose sounds that filled her ears as well as her eyes with horror and even infected her nostrils. That dank smell was not the earth: it was the stench of death and decomposition; it rose so that she felt a physical nausea and a darkness before her eyes. In that mist her vision swam before her with a new and ghastly particularity of detail. The air seemed to solidify and thicken, while fiery specks darted across its poisonous gloom; to shake with noises multitudinous and terrifying, with a horrible undertone of shrieks and groans; before her feet she saw a surging tide of human suffering that rose and cried aloud to her for pity and release. And sud-

denly, from the confused and bloody welter, a form detached itself: a young man, tall and fair, beneath whose pallid brows, dust-stained and flecked with gore, two eyes looked at her, eyes of a pure clear grey whose lucid gaze seemed to pierce her very soul. Transfixed, she stared into them. He lay on his back, his bare head and shoulders propped up on other bodies, his lower limbs extended before him, so that he seemed of portentous height. No part of him moved, except his eyes, and they were awful. She could not evade them: they held her, merciless, and compelled her to take in their message. They called to her, they accused her, they made her responsible for their insufferable torment. Clear and pale, full of a light that despite its cold remoteness seemed to burn into her, 'Save me, save me,' the eyes cried to her. 'You sent me here: you condemned me to this: I call to you to stop it, to set me free. You, you are responsible.' And, suddenly, they were Harold's eyes.

And Harold was looking, perhaps had been looking for minutes, at her: this, and not any words he could not utter, was what his mind held, and what, in this moment, that had seemed to her to be one almost of unconsciousness on her part, he had given her. His lips might well be dumb, his eyes blank, if this was what lived behind them. She saw, he showed her, this. For her, it was a vision, a phantasm, a nightmare, a thing that passed. But he knew it. For him it was reality; the substance of experience, throughout weeks, months, nay, years. It was more than three years now since August, 1914; and of those three years he had spent nearly thirty months in France. She could think of men, brave men, whom three had finished; who had got transferred to G.H.Q. or home jobs, because they knew what would happen to them if they stayed... where Harold had stayed. To her he could, even in this strange thought-transference that

proved how close was the bond, still, between them, only show its simulacrum, its surface. Of him the thing itself had taken possession. That was where he had been; that was where he had got to go back; from that he had hoped to be released...

The others were talking: she had not heard what they said. But now there was a sound of chairs being pushed back, and Cassie was gathering the plates together, preparing to clear the table. That had always been the signal of permission to her and Harold to go upstairs. She rose, moved towards the door. On the threshold she turned, looked round; but he had moved away, he was speaking to his mother: his back was towards her. What did it matter? She knew he was not coming up. Mechanically, she went up the stairs, two flights, and so into their sitting-room.

The first thing she noticed there was more sweet peas in the translucent glass bowl that always stood on the little round table by the piano. She stood, gazing down at them. Why should these innocent shapes, so romantic and so lovely, skiffs on which a fairy might be wafted off into the airy realms of light, with coloured sails set bravely to the breeze, now be transformed into images of death and corruption? — their white the pallor of prison, their reds and blues and purples, blood, blood drying and coagulating? Why should Harold, 'fair, kind, and true,' have been wrenched out of his nature to a murderer? — murderer, not of Stephen Henshaw only, and of men unknown and innocent as he, but of himself, the most innocent of any?

Why? What was the use of asking why? There was no answer to such questions. And yet she must ask them, for on no other terms could she be near to him. Yes, if that nearness was to be something more than the proximity of two corpses, she must ask them, must see what they meant.

She must accept the truth of his suffering without allowing it to paralyze her mind, as his was paralyzed. If he was far away from her, if she, to him, was only a dim figure walking outside the fiery circle in which his feet were held, that distance was not peculiar to her; everything, everyone — except perhaps his comrades of the trenches, the men who knew, as no imagining could tell her, what he knew — shared that dimness. If she could make the smallest breach in his awful solitude...

Harold, in the past, had been a person of warm but few affections. There were a very large number of people who liked him and whom he liked; but those for whom he cared greatly had been a small group. To them, however, he gave, and from them got, something essential to his life. It had not been illusion, her sense that she mattered to Harold as he did to her. One did not live for four years of happiness with someone, and not know these things; not their kind of happiness. Losing her would have been to him what losing him would have been to her. No need to dwell on that. Outside of her, who were the others? There was his mother. For her he had a deep, tender, protective affection. Idle profanation to try to analyse it. She had never known her own mother. Then there were his friends. Among them, two had really counted — Jim Carthew and Stephen Henshaw. Once she had said to Harold, apropos of these two, 'Two loves you have of comfort and despair'; for Jim was as plainly compact of light and joyousness as Harold himself, while Stephen, then, at any rate, had seemed to her the incarnation of the dark spirits of doubt and denial. Now both were gone. For Jim, he could feel a pure sorrow: but about Stephen, what?

How was it that this aspect had never occurred to her before? Extraordinary how one could think round and

round a point, and always miss it. If Harold thought that she and Stephen had been lovers, that thought must lacerate him — and not only through her. Of that aspect she had thought enough. Of the other, not at all. Yet the other was for Harold hardly less poignant. For Stephen, then, had failed him, nay, betrayed: broken their friendship. So he had to think of Stephen with bitterness. That he had killed him was terrible enough: that he had to disbelieve in him would be, for Harold, worse. So, Stephen was murdered twice, and an irreparable wound dealt to friendship, through the retrospective tarnish cast on the oldest attachment in Harold's life; for he and Stephen had been at school together: he was, indeed, the only one of his friends who went back so far.

The more she thought of their friendship, and its loyalty, remembering how, at the very last, it had been alive in Stephen, the more dreadful did it seem that on Harold's anguished mind there should be cast a shadow that need not lie upon it. Here, at last, was something that she could do for him: here were words that she could utter that might have some healing power.

She looked at her watch. It was not yet ten o'clock. He would not have gone to bed. Idle to expect him to come up here; he would not do it, and it would be cruel by asking to compel him to refuse. Besides, she had not lit the fire: the room was cold, and, despite the careful housemaiding Cassie had obviously devoted to it, looked thoroughly unlived in and unlike itself. She must set it to rights to-morrow. Now, however, she must go downstairs and look for him. She was not going to think more: her nerve would go if she did.

She took off her outdoor shoes and replaced them by slippers: washed her hands: brushed her hair, though without paying much heed to any of these operations. She re-

moved the carnations from her coat and looked at them: they were dying, but still held a faint fragrance; she stuck them through her belt: Berta would like her to be wearing them...

When she opened her door, the house sounded dead, but the hall and staircase lights were still on. As she passed the rooms on the first landing — the little room where Cassie slept and the large front one where her parents did — she saw a line of light under the door and hoped that it meant that Mrs. Claviger had retired.

She had. In the dining-room there were only Harold and his father, sitting on either side of the fire. Both were smoking: the room, very hot, with a large fire burning and the heavy rep curtains drawn tight across the windows, was dim with smoke. They sat uncomfortably, for the table, with its ugly red, green, and yellow tapestry cloth slightly crooked, had been pushed back, but not far enough to leave a clear space between it and the hearth, with the result that they looked as though they were sitting in some station waiting-room. The oil paintings on the walls, only dimly seen, since the light that hung above the dining-table was pulled far down, as it had been at tea, might have been portraits of directors. On the faces of the two men the light fell full, throwing up the startling contrast between the purplish red of Mr. Claviger's and the dry pallor of his son's. They sat in very much the same attitude, but she saw no other likeness between them.

Harold got up: Mr. Claviger remained seated. The older man looked, as she regarded him now more nearly, as though he were already half asleep. His eyes were dull and puffy, and there was a disconsolate droop to his mouth. She felt, suddenly, irrelevantly, sorry for him. At tea, he had seemed his usual rather brutal self, but sitting there now, huddled up

by the fire, he had a beaten, broken air, as though this thing had been going on too long and too far for him.

'I want to talk to you for a moment, Harold... if your father doesn't mind. It's cold upstairs...'

'Hallo! What's that?' Mr. Claviger looked up keenly. 'Yes, yes — you'd better have it out. I told him so. Can't go on like this, you know. You'd like me to clear out, eh? Strap is what I'd like to take to you, young woman, and you know it. He turned that pistol of his the wrong way.'

She smiled. She felt positively grateful to Mr. Claviger. For him thin ice did not exist.

'Women nowadays,' he went on in a grumbling voice, 'are above themselves. Plenty of trouble we have with them in the mills, these days. They think such a darn lot of themselves.' He had got up and was stumping towards the door as he spoke. 'You give it her, my boy. It might wake you up. I don't know what's come to him.' He was addressing her now. 'Really, I don't.'

His eyes travelled back to his son, troubled, helplessly troubled. He was fond of Harold, then, in his own way. 'All the same, I'd like to see him take that strap. I'd feel a heap better, and so would he.'

'And so would I,' remarked Jean drily.

Their eyes met, on this. Mr. Claviger threw his head back — that action, in him, was exactly like Harold's; what a long time, though, since she had seen Harold's head lifted up to laugh! — and emitted a loud guffaw.

'That's the stuff, lass! We'll make a right Lancashire woman of thee, yet. Where there's spunk, there's hope. But a good leathering never hurt anyone. Well, good-night, Harold.'

'Good-night, Father.'

'Good-night, Jean.'

'Good-night.'

Harold opened the door and closed it again behind him. They could hear his heavy footsteps on the stairs, then a door bang overhead.

Jean was standing before the fire. Harold approached, and knocked out his pipe. He stood beside her, she could have touched him by stretching out her hand. She did not: she did not try to look at him: she dared not look at him, for then her courage would ooze out, and — now she knew — everything in her mind would melt away into an insane desire to take his hand, to kiss him, to murmur things to him that were of no interest to him, to appeal to him on a side that it would be low and unfair and dishonouring in her to try to rouse. It was not for that she had come down. Instead, she stared into the red heart of the fire, and in the centre of its core saw Stephen's face.

'Harold — there's something I must say to you. I ought to have said it long ago, but it wasn't in my mind. You think that Stephen and I were lovers. We weren't. Never. Stephen was your friend, to the last. There was a time, soon after you went back last, when he thought that he had fallen in love with me, but, whether or no, we were never more than friends. He gave me a wonderful friendship... that was all. It was the more wonderful that he... felt... what I didn't, ever. That day, when you came, it was about you he was talking to me. He was trying to make me see... you.'

Her words fell into the silence. She could hear his breathing: hear him take a quick, deep, gasping breath; then, feel rather than see that he turned a little away from her, to rest his elbow on the mantelpiece and bury his head in it. Now she looked round. His face was hidden from her: she could only see his mouse-coloured hair, thick against the crumpled

sleeve of his blue serge coat. He was raising his head: looking out into the room. She averted her eyes.

'My God!' he muttered. Then again, 'My God!' — and dropped his head back on his arms.

It did not seem to her that she had found the right words; but the right words would not come, and she must make do with what she could command.

'I understand, now, why you must have thought... that he'd betrayed you. But he didn't. Never. He was the only person who saw... saw what it means. The war, I mean. He tried, he was trying then, to make me see. I — but I don't want to talk about me. He was kind — like a brother: yours and mine — that was all.'

Harold did not move. She felt no impulse to ask 'You believe me?' She knew he did. Truth himself, he was not so changed that he did not expect truth from others.

A long time — or a time that seemed long — passed before he raised his head again. Then he spoke, but to himself, it seemed, rather than to her.

'I don't know what it was. Something seemed to crash through me, like a streak of living lightning, and it was done. I didn't think: I had no thoughts. I saw you and him. And that woman's letters. And what Ned Fowler had told me about Enid, just before he went. And then after that, Eden — he fitted it all in: told me Stephen was like that. Was he like that?'

Fiercely now his eyes interrogated hers.

'Not with me. Esther said so — but you can't trust her, and I don't believe it, now. All I know is that he was not like that with me: that he was heavenly kind — tender — compassionate — patient — gentle, with me. I must have hurt him, awfully — but he never let me see. So I don't think he can have been like that. No... I know, I see now,

that I was horridly to blame. All through. Worst of all, I let you think, when you were home, that I cared for him, or could care for him. But I never did: I never could.'

There was nothing fierce in Harold's eyes now, as he shook his head slowly.

'To blame? You? Oh, no... I never thought that. I made it very hard for you — but... I couldn't help it. You don't know; no one knows. And I can't tell you.'

'No, I know I don't. I try to — but I don't. It's as you say — I can't.'

He was still looking at her, but she was hardly aware of it, so held was her imagination again by the images his broken words called up.

'Ah!' A long, sighing breath, a breath as of amazed, unlooked-for relief, came from between his closed lips. 'Do you mean that?'

'Mean that I don't know?' She was looking at him, astonished, but, suddenly, unafraid. 'Yes — that's all I've learned. It's taken... all this. And that's the result.' She groaned.

But he was speaking again.

'I don't, either. No. Being there, you know less than anyone. Knowing, understanding — all that's gone. You can't even try. If you knew how the people who understand — how ridiculous they are. Even Stephen was like that.'

'He thought he did understand — that's why the others hated him. I thought he did, too. Didn't he?'

'No, no!' cried Harold, almost with eagerness. 'No. The more he thought he understood, the less did he, really. It isn't, you see, a thing to understand. One day it will run down — that's all. It's a machine. We're caught in it.'

'Then — there's nothing for us to do?'

'No. Nothing.'

'Oh, Harold... it's too awful.'

'Yes. It is. But, there it is.'

They looked at each other, on this. Suddenly now it struck her that they had been talking as they used to talk; just saying, each of them, what came, what was most in their minds. She must not say anything, must not show anything. That would be fatal.

There was a silence, a long silence. They stood there, side by side. What he felt she could not guess: probably he was hardly aware that she was there. She was acutely aware of him: it took all her self-command just to stand still, apparently taking no notice. That he could be himself, although she was there, that they could stand, so, in silence, together — that was something, something not achieved since... since it all began. Yes, not since the war, really.

Suddenly she heard Harold's voice — very low, as though he were talking to himself.

'Stephen,' he was murmuring. 'How frightful! — I killed him, for nothing. Like all the rest... for nothing. Like that poor boy from Mannheim who gave me his girl's photograph...' He dived into his pocket, and, after a moment's rummaging through his papers, held out to her a common, shiny, little *carte-de-visite* of a fair-haired, round-faced *Mädchen*. She took it, looked at it.

'Poor girl. She's rather like Zillpah, isn't she? Poor boy ... she cared for him. Perhaps she was as stupid about it as I have been. But, she cared for him. Oh, Harold!'

He gave no sign that he had heard. He only held out his hand for the photograph and replaced it in his pocket. Then, after another silence:

'I must be off to bed. I have to go up to town to-morrow by that early train. I want to get back at night, so it must be that one... Good-night.'

He held out his hand. She laid hers in it. His clasp — warm, now: not chill as on that day in prison — closed over her hand. She looked up into his face. It was dark again: his eyes lightless again: but — was it illusion? — far hidden in them there was something that lived, something even that recognized her, although from a long way off. What her eyes showed him she did not know. She said nothing: her lips she could control, if not her eyes. For a moment he held her hand within his grasp. Then, with another 'Good-night,' he left her.

II

'HAROLD has gone up to town,' said Cassie, as she handed Jean her letters and the local newspaper and deposited her breakfast on the little table by her bed. Jean dug her watch out from under the pillow: it was not yet nine. She looked at her letters: one was from Roberta, the other, readdressed by her, in an unknown hand. She left them lying on the tray.

'To the War Office,' Cassie went on. 'I suppose that means he's going back?'

Their eyes met. Jean nodded.

'Mother's in an awful state. She never seemed to mind, before; or take it in properly. But this time she's frightfully upset. That list of Bluehills casualties — you'll see it in the paper — suddenly set her off. I can't think why, but it seems to have made her sure he is going to be killed. He told her he was sure he wasn't. But she doesn't believe him. Why should she? I don't suppose he believes himself. I don't know what I am to do with her.'

'Poor Cassie... And I'd be less than no good, should I?'

Cassie hesitated. 'I'm afraid not. She...'

'Yes? Out with it.'

'She says, now, it's all your fault.'

'She's quite right. Oh, not in the sense she means: not through Stephen. But — I let him go, all by himself.'

Cassie, however, shook her head. 'You couldn't have prevented his going. He always does what he means to.'

'That's true. But I could have shared it: I could have... Oh, what's the use of talking...'

'I don't know.' Cassie suddenly was moved to a longer sentence than Jean had often heard her deliver. 'Sometimes I think we don't talk half enough: our going on, for ever saying nothing — I believe that's what's really made Mother queer, and is making Harold queer, too. I've always been queer, so it doesn't matter about me. But Harold — he's hardly spoken ten words since he got back from the trial.'

'He doesn't speak to you, either?'

'Oh, he says "Pass the butter," and that sort of thing: and he talks to Father about the mills. But that's all. Last night at tea was bad enough — but it was better than Wednesday. He arrived, you know, by the train that gets in after midnight. We all stayed up. Well, it was too awful.' She covered her face with her hands. 'He's really a little better since you came. But what's the use — if he's going back to France?'

Jean drank her coffee: spread a slice of bread with butter. Cassie was still there; she was glad of that; and they were back on their old footing, such as it was. That was one of the things she had got to do now: to do something (better leave it vague, for when one asked What? difficulties rose up, appalling) for Cassie.

'Cassie, you're very fond of him, aren't you?'

'Yes — he's the point. I can't imagine it, without him. There'd just be nothing at all...'

'Yes,' said Jean gravely.

Cassie looked at her. 'Poor Jean,' she said, patting her hand. Then, over another pause, 'Oh, I don't know why I was so silly as to listen to Father or Mother, or bother what the papers said. Of course you couldn't care for Stephen, knowing *him*.'

There was a silence: Cassie stood, looking at Jean with an expression that made her ask:

'Does it make any difference to you?'

'Difference? No, why should it? He's my brother. Just as he always was.'

'Were you fond of George?'

'George? Oh, no. But George wasn't in the least like Harold. Never. George was... unkind. And... false. He told lies: got round you — especially round Mother. Harold and George — there's no resemblance. With Harold — it's just the war, isn't it?'

Yes — Cassie, despite her simplicity, saw, immediately, what it had taken Jean this long tortured beating about of brains to perceive. 'Just the war' — yes, that was all there was to say. But Cassie was still troubled.

'Jean — why does he mind it so much more than the others seem to do?'

Jean shook her head. 'Because of what you've said, I think. He's nice, he's kind, he's truthful. And it — of course he couldn't imagine it. He's like a child in the dark — all by himself.'

Cassie, on this, suddenly fell on her knees by the bed, and, burying her head in the pillow behind Jean, sobbed desperately, uncontrollably. Her sobs shook her. Jean could only pat her shoulder and wait for the fit to pass. When the girl at last lifted her tear-stained face, she took it between her hands and kissed it. Cassie said nothing; she swallowed

hard; glanced at her for a moment, and then rushed out of the room.

Jean leaned back on the pillow. Harold had gone to the War Office. He was going back. That was reality. Her dream — her dream that she had lain in his arms, that he had kissed her and murmured in her ear that, now they were together again, nothing else mattered — was nonsense: the cruellest, most mocking irony. Darkness yawned before his feet and was about to swallow him up again; to her, darkness; to him, a horror, more awful from familiarity, for which there were no words, which he met simply with his courage — that frightful courage of his which forbade his taking his own life. Irony? Yes — but was that the whole of it? Her dream was only a coloured phantom, but within it lay a core of reality, that had not perished, although it had been, for her, overlaid and distorted to forms of pain, and, for him, buried deep under horror and suffering. Always, she had loved him, foolish and feeble as her love had been: had he not always loved her? Passion might be dead, the terms and tones of affection stifled under hideous experience; but was not the essence of their companionship something that transcended either? For her, it lived on in the very intensity with which his suffering was her suffering: did it not live on, for him, in the very silence that had tortured her, would torture her again? If he could talk to other people and not to her, was not that because she and only she was admitted, could not be denied admission, to the dread inner chamber of his loneliness? He had tried to keep her out. Why? Because he wanted to spare her. She was not to share: he was going to bear it by himself. She had cast everything onto him, but he — he had tried to safeguard her, even from knowing what he endured. And she, alas, had let that be. Perhaps, in 1915, when he first came home,

fresh from the shock of it, she might have been admitted: but then she was not ready: then, she still had her theatrical crusading armour on. How he might have hated her, for that! By 1917, silence had closed down over him; and her chatter about understanding barred and bolted the door in her own face and his. Yes, last night had shown her that. In September — she must look at that, too. The crude explanation that satisfied Eden: that of jealousy: was it not, in its own way, true? Suddenly, and with the irresistible authority of a thing presented to the eye, he then saw before him what friends of his had told him that they had found on their return home: and, with the dire swiftness with which, in him, action followed on idea, he had smashed that intolerable picture to pieces with his gun... a gun lifted with the automatic response of the soldier. It was a caricature of affection, as the actions of jealousy must always be: but, for all that, a refraction from some flame that still burned, however dimmed, within. Of course he cared. Not because of that, but because they had four years of happy companionship behind them: had, for four years, known each other in the fullest sense that word could carry. Dreadful, dreadful, that even that knowledge had not saved them from the shot that killed his dearest friend, or from the alienation of their minds, that there was to be no time, now, to mend. If only he were not going back! But he was. The war was there. One might think, talk, feel. It swept all that aside: left no room for that.

Jean picked up the letters. The unknown one was in educated writing, good thick paper, London, S.W., postmark. She tore it open and read the nine or ten unsigned lines it contained with a faint curl of the lip:

An officer's wife feels that she must say how deeply she regrets that Captain Claviger did not use two bullets instead of one and so

remove a woman who is a foul disgrace to her country and her sex. It is my nightly prayer that you may suffer (if you can suffer, which I doubt) ten times for every pang you have inflicted on that heroic heart, and may lose everything in life that is of value to you.

'Her "nightly prayer" seems to be heard,' said Jean to herself. 'I wonder how she knew my address.' She turned to the other — Berta's.

My dear Jean, — I have wondered incessantly since you left how you found everything. As you can imagine, I have thought of nothing else. I have come to the ridiculously simple conclusion that the war explains it all. Not quite in the sense Eden meant, perhaps. But really, for all that. Of course he was right in saying (as he didn't) that it is fatuous to make a fuss about killing one man when to kill as many as possible is noble and heroic. But there's more in it than that. We're too much in it to see it, but I have made a drawing I must show you of War — a sort of foul-breathing monster whose stench (I've really got that rather well) distorts and changes into dreadfulness everything it touches — you see men turning into pigs and women into serpents. (You are not one of those, but your friend Esther is.) This may sound very irrelevant — but I don't think it is. And there's nothing else I can say: nothing that really bears on your own problem. Except this. I *know* your pluck will pull you through. I need not say that your bed is here for you at any time, and the sooner you are here again and the longer you stay, the better pleased I shall be. The papers get more and more frightful. Their babble makes me sick. I'm becoming a peace-at-any-pricer. But I suppose the bright hope of getting Americans to come and be killed will keep us at it. Oh, Lord!

Jean folded up the letter. Yes. Berta was right. One forgot the war because it had become a fact like the atmosphere, so omnipresent that one took it for granted, thought of life only on its terms. No argument about it, no thinking, no feeling got to grips with it, it was so immense; it could not be separated as an object of thought: it was in the mind that tried to think, vitiating its processes. Did

that, however, true as it was, relieve her of responsibility? She could not forget her vision of the field of slaughter, and those eyes, with their terrible reproach, their mute accusation of complicity: they would not let her go; they cried to her that she was responsible. How responsible? Had she not cared enough?

No — she had not. She had cared for Harold, but not cared enough for the things in him that she yet saw were most truly him — his kindness, his disinterestedness, his power of feeling in himself what happened to others. That was the centre of his suffering now — not his own pain, theirs. And she had not shared that, in the past, and so was shut out from full comprehension of it now. She had not been a good citizen. She had not even been kind to those nearest to her. She had only to think of Cassie, and of her mother and father. She had lived among them, happy, as a stranger; to the end, the house had remained for her what it was at the beginning, an hotel. And this real indifference — this selfishness, for it was nothing less — did it not extend to Harold, too? In 1914, what had she done? She had sacrificed him; had pushed him into the Inferno, and then, when he was in, what she had thought about had been her own suffering. Just like everybody else. But what could she have done? Her brain reeled when she attempted to set it to this task. War — it was at once so vast and so simple that thinking seemed to have nothing to do with it; no more than with a gale. The mind, caught and transfixed, could only produce the passionate asseveration that there must never be another. That, translated into the terms of high politics, merely meant that this war must go on and on. 'On to victory' — as Sir Michael had said. She remembered the young officer who had declared that he was not going back — 'I can't have any part in it, any more' — and Harold's

eyes on him. Gerard Campbell was saving his own soul; he said so. Harold was no longer interested in his own soul — and at no time would it have interested him to save it alone.

Mechanically she picked up the newspaper, and opened it. The grim face of battle looked at her from its leaded headlines. 'Heavy Fighting — Stiff Enemy Resistance — Big Lancashire Losses'... Always that fearful list. She could not read the *communiqués*: they meant nothing. Her eye was fixed on the endless list of 'fallen': serried rows of names: then a block, long, too, in black type — 'Bluehills Losses':

Thomas Ashton
Ephraim Brewer
George F. Brown
James Dalton...

'James Dalton' — her mind swerved. Jimmy — oh, no, it could not be. Yet, when she looked again, there was his regimental description accurately given. It must be Jimmy — shrunk to one death-dealing line in a long catalogue: obliterated, finished, by two words of print. And Zillpah — what did this mean to Zillpah? Everything that Harold's death could mean to her. The lines of print swam before her eyes —

Thomas Ashton
Ephraim Brewer
George F. Brown
James Dalton...

perhaps every one of those names, and all the other names that made up the long list, meant that. Of course there were cruel cases, where it was not so; but in most, grief was there, and in Zillpah's all that grief could imply was there. Casualties — so long as they happened to others, one called them that, did not take them in, rejected responsibility. But

when the words meant people — people one knew: when one saw what 'On to victory' meant... what did one do, then?

She must go and see Zillpah. Not to comfort her — she had no comfort to give: but to learn from her how to bear, how to survive. In the afternoon she would go. The morning she spent in putting the sitting-room to rights and in exercising her fingers on scales on the piano.

At dinner Harold, of course, was not there. Mr. Claviger apparently was not expected: for him, if he were coming, they always waited, but Mrs. Claviger and Cassie were sitting in silence when she entered the room: so they sat, day after day, in their ugly clothes in that ugly stuffy room. At night, with curtains drawn and a fire crackling, it had a certain rather stifling comfort: but on a day like this, when the autumn heat, dimmed by the smoke haze, made the sky a uniform opaque white which took instead of giving colour, and the air, enervatingly moist, hung moveless, the atmosphere of the room seemed to have a specific gravity of its own that choked the lungs and oppressed the spirits. Then the harsh red and blue of the carpet, the disagreeable texture of the yellow-green velveteen covering chairs and sofa, their hue only too faithfully repeated in the wall-paper, and the purplish red of the rep curtains screamed against each other. The portrait of Mr. Claviger over the mantelpiece, a portrait painted some fifteen years ago, by an artist who had rendered his strong flesh tones with needlessly brilliant faithfulness, grinned down with a satisfaction that was positively sinister. It was a bad portrait, but the grin — which was in the eyes, not in the unsmiling lips — was admirably lifelike. The infernal amusement in those eyes often intrigued her, though as a rule she sat, by her own device, with her back turned to the picture.

'You're late,' was all Mrs. Claviger said. She seldom did

make any contribution to ordinary conversation beyond such a remark.

'Yes. I am so sorry. I was finishing an exercise.'

Mrs. Claviger looked at her. 'I am astonished that you care to play.'

'Oh,' said Cassie bravely, 'it must be a great comfort.'

'Comfort!' cried her mother, in her cold, trickling voice, at once numb and penetrating. 'Comfort! You talk about comfort. There is none. How can there be any?'

Her remarks did not seem to be addressed to anyone in particular. Cassie shrugged her shoulders and glanced at Jean as though to indicate at once that she was used to this, and that no notice ought to be taken of it.

'It will go on and on till they are all taken. First George. Now Harold. I knew when George went away that I should never see him again. Yes. And now I know I shan't see Harold again.'

'Perhaps you won't. But that doesn't mean that he's going to be killed, you know. You might die,' said Cassie with surprising brutality.

'No,' wailed her mother. 'It's not that. It's he who will go, not I. I shall be left to suffer.'

Her eyes widened. There was a horrible elevation, exaltation about her: the martyr's crown was round her brow, and she gloried in it. Harold must die to give her more, richer, exceptional opportunities for suffering. She was proud of her suffering.

'You are young, both of you. You've got a life on the other side of this. But I haven't. This is all there is for me. And it's all pain: more and more of it, mounting round me in waves. I can't escape: I shall just sink under it gradually.'

She put her hands over her face and sobbed. Jean felt a movement, not of sympathy, but of irritation.

'Never mind,' said Cassie. 'It doesn't mean anything.'

But Mrs. Claviger had raised her head. Her eyes, wet and gleaming, had a strange rapt stare. 'But I *know:* I know something you don't. Suffering is the gate. Through it one reaches reality.'

Was this what suffering did to one? Mrs. Claviger had suffered: dreadfully; was this religion of pain all that could be done with it? Jean's mind seemed to swing between abysses. At one end were the people who did not mind: who, from whatever reason, accepted cruelty, enjoyed it, and so created cruelty in ever-widening circles. At the other, the people who minded: who minded so much that their natures were subdued to the pain they worked in, and they themselves in a sort of frenzy of egotism became a fresh cause of pain in others. Must suffering always mean egotism? Was there no way of minding that did not transfer pity from the being one pitied to one's self? If there were, Zillpah would have found it.

Over the town, as she walked down in the late afternoon, the heat haze hung dense and breathless. The air was oppressive: already the trees in the Park were turning brown, and the leaves hung withering on the branches; as she descended the hill, the haze thickened almost to a fog — a blanket through which the sun could not penetrate. One felt as though one were working one's way through a mass of rather dirty cotton-wool. She met no one as she walked; in Bluehills one seldom did, in working hours. Cassie had told her that all sorts of people had been doing extremely well in the trade; there were more motors than there had ever been, the Manchester and Blackpool trains were always packed; new houses were springing up at Saint Anne's and Lytham. Little sign of this prosperity as she struck into the

maze of cobbled streets behind the Technical Institute, looking as usual dark, lightless, dead. The temperature was high: but there was no colour anywhere, no sense of sun. The rows of low-browed little two-storied dwellings, set flat on narrow pavements on either side of the cobbled roadway, looked all alike with their shut windows and drawn lace curtains — curtains without which the passer-by could have seen straight into the rooms. The streets were quiet: the people were in the mills, the children at school. At the far end of Queen Mary Road was a high wall like a fortress —one of the outer boundaries of the nearest factory—and from behind it came a faint, intermittent hum of machinery.

At 44 she paused and knocked. No answer — she knocked again, more loudly. Still no answer. A third time. The door opened and Liza Jean, just tall enough now to reach the handle, stood before her in a blue print dress, a yellow kitten clutched tightly in her arms. She stared, with eyes so wide open that they seemed perfectly round. How clear they were: like pure water, endlessly deep, fathomless; no hint in them of the forget-me-not blue of Zillpah's eyes, with their long fringy lashes; here the lashes, though very thick, were very short, and merely gave a startling definition to the candour of the eyes. The lashes were like Harold's; and the eyes were like his too: as Liza Jean stared at her now they wore exactly that look of innocent, awakened-from-sleep surprise that made her heart turn with a shock of sudden melting sweetness when she had met it in his.

A minute had passed without her being aware of the fact that she had been standing there, saying nothing, staring at the child.

'Mummy's at mill,' said Liza Jean, in answer to her inquiry. 'But she'll be back at tea.'

'Oh, yes, of course. I had forgotten. So you and kitty are

looking after the house. I'm your Aunt Jean: you don't remember me?'

Liza Jean's manners had not reached polite mendacity: obviously she did not; but she was friendly and held out the kitten to Jean to stroke, and told her how she had found it one night in a corner of the back yard mewing and quite weak, and how Mummy had given it warm milk and told her she might keep it and have it for her very own. 'And now it follows me everywhere like a little dog, and sleeps with me; we keep each other warm.' At that the little round face broke into a smile and Liza Jean was pretty. And she had manners, the little thing, for now she asked whether Jean would not come in. 'Granny's in the kitchen.'

Looking at her watch, Jean saw that it was in fact after five. The walk, though not long, had tired her: to go away and come back again was more than she could face. So she followed Liza Jean along the tiny lobby — dark, and at once damp and stuffy, into the kitchen. There by the side of the fire Granny Leach was sitting in her usual chair on guard over the great black kettle. All day she sat there, had done, day in, day out, ever since the slight stroke she had four or five years ago. She looked up, and her almost toothless gums parted in what was meant to be a polite smile, as Jean approached, but there was no recognition in her eyes. It was very hot in the kitchen and very stuffy — although the window was wide open, no air seemed to come in — yet she was wrapped in a shawl. It was a coloured shawl, and it suddenly occurred to Jean to wonder whether she knew of Jimmy Dalton's death. In spite of her feud with his mother, she had, Jean knew, been fond of Jimmy: and, anyhow, Mrs. Dalton had quietly died two months after he went out.

'I am Mrs. Claviger,' she said, looking straight into the two eyes in which all the life there still was in the old woman

seemed to be concentrated. She heard: instantly they narrowed to two angry points. 'Mrs. Harold Claviger.' The eyes cleared at once.

'Aye, aye,' Mrs. Leach nodded. Anger died down, and something else took its place. Of course she knew: everyone in Bluehills knew. Yet nothing showed in those old eyes of the ugly gloating she had met so often in the eyes of the friends who had suddenly found an interest in coming to see her in London during the weeks before the trial. 'Poor lad — he's had a deal to put up with, first and last. Aye, and you, too, I dare say.'

Jean felt the colour rushing to her cheeks. There was sympathy in the old eyes which unnerved her: she could think of nothing to say. Mrs. Leach did not seem to expect her to say anything. She was used to sitting in silence, hour after hour: shut off by her deafness, even more than by her inability to move: Zillpah out at the mill, the children at school, quarrelling with Mrs. Dalton had been one of her few interests — and it had been cut off. For her there were no holidays, no events. What went on in her old head, Jean wondered? Old — she could not really be as old as she looked. Zillpah, her eldest child, was not thirty; Rob, her youngest, only eight or nine; women of her sort married early. Of her sort — she caught herself up. Were there really sorts of people? What right had one to think so, or to assume, because it was easy, that, if there were, they were sorted according to their income and the size of their house? Mrs. Leach probably had as many fine feelings as Esther Exton, or even Agnes Lorbeer. Zillpah, she knew, had more, far finer. She happened to know Zillpah, that was all.

On the table in the centre of the kitchen was a piece of white oilcloth on which Liza Jean now began laying out cups and plates, singly, taking them carefully out of the

cupboard. Jean turned to help her: but when they had set a loaf, a piece of margarine, and a jam jar of pickles, there seemed no more to put, and she could only sit down and wait while the child continued to play happily enough, to all appearance, with the kitten, and Mrs. Leach stared before her at the fire.

She looked about her and tried to imagine the life of the household. This, after all, was the typical English home: far more homes in its length and breadth like this than like Esther's or the Clavigers'. The kitchen was where they lived, as did most Bluehillians, but what an uncomfortable room! The huge black grate meant an incessant labour of black-leading. To-day its tiny sad eye of fire under the kettle was enough to make the room stuffy; but in winter no fire was able to warm it through. Always there must be draughts with those two doors so placed that there was a double leakage of cold air, from the passage and from the window over the sink. Out of the window one looked onto a dreary square of yard with broken paving, a diseased ivy bush, and some desolate sheds at the far end. Suddenly, she had a sharp vision of the view from Stephen's flat — the great sweep of sky, an ever-changing, luminous landscape of moving cloud and sun, and below, the river gleaming through the trees, perpetual image and symbol of the life that defied buildings and noise and pressure and at last found silence and solitude in the sea. Two white gulls flying low across it... messengers from infinite distance, reminders of infinite space. That view: Stephen's life altogether — rich in varied contacts, pictures, music, books, ideas: all the big things that enabled one to see one's own little disasters as irrelevant — swept back over her and she felt that then she had for a few brief months escaped from prison. Now, here, she was clamped into it harder than ever. Bluehills:

how horrible it was, and how much of it there was! And if for her, even now, there was, if only in recollection, another world, for Zillpah there was no other world. Her contact with any other had been second-hand: only through Jimmy had she knowledge of its existence. In this contracted kitchen all her life was confined. At that table, which took up most of the space, they ate their poor meals; at it the children must do their lessons at night; there Jimmy must have sat reading. Except in bed, he and Zillpah could never have been alone together. In their brief hours of freedom there were always the children and Mrs. Leach. Those were his books in a row along the dresser: she looked at them, worn and shabby in their neat brown paper covers, and at the large portraits of William Morris and Keir Hardie that hung in the one free space of wall, and remembered the passion in his voice and in his face as he cried, 'If only they would wake up and see it, there's nothing the workers couldn't change.' How could one see anything in a room like this? It was clean, scrupulously kept, but its dreary ugliness hurt: and, Jimmy gone, what save its ugliness was left?

A harsh sound rent the air. Liza Jean, the kitten firmly clasped, jumped from the hearthrug, crying, 'There's the buzzer!' Even Mrs. Leach cocked her head. By that sound life in Bluehills was controlled: now the machines were letting their servants out.

'Mummy will be coming now,' Liza Jean said. 'Come and watch for her.'

Jean followed her to the door. For a minute or two the street lay dead, vacant: then round the corner came the vanguard of the hurrying stream. It seemed mostly to be made up of women, who passed, their heads down, their eyes on the ground, few of them talking, moving as fast as

they could, escaping from one form of toil to take up another: hastening back to their homes to assume the neglected domestic burden: to cook and scrub, wash and clean, in the hours left them by the factories. There was nothing joyous in their hurry: it was a driven chase; these women never could catch up with all they had to do, one saw that in their narrowed eyes, their tense grey faces, their careless dress. They could not think of clothes: it was with a sensation almost of vertigo that Jean found herself trying to join this world and Esther's in a single series. And yet they had the same feelings, these women, as Esther's friends: the same desires. Once they had been, potentially at any rate, as nice-looking. One took it comfortably for granted that they were different, that they did not mind; until one knew them. Zillpah did mind. Liza Jean's quicker eyes had discerned her; she was running out now to meet her; and as Jean watched her approach she realized that even now, in her shabby coat and skirt and shapeless straw hat, she was a very pretty woman. She was only six or seven and twenty. At forty... after fifteen years of Queen Mary Road and the mill, by herself, with no Jimmy to help her or to care for her... A lump rose in Jean's throat... And Jimmy was only one item in a column's casualty list. Every morning brought a fresh one.

From somewhere Rob and Milly had also appeared; they had been delivering handbills of some sort on the way home from school. Both looked exhausted by the heat: Milly, with a fragile prettiness which was only too like her sister's, dangerously so. Neither she nor Rob, too tall for his bulk, had ever had the robust frame and brilliant colouring of Liza Jean. Clamouring for tea, the children swept in together. Zillpah, on the doorstep, paused to say to Jean, 'They'll clear off when they've had their tea. It *is* nice of you to come.'

'Oh, no. I had to... Oh, Zillpah, I am so desperately sorry...'

Zillpah looked down the street. There was no expression in her eyes and hardly any colour.

'Yes. I knew you would be.'

'Do they know?' Jean did not know why she asked that — only because it was so difficult to think of anything to say. Zillpah's expressionless face: her rigid quiet: the house: the mill people — were making it so much worse in Jean's mind.

'Milly and Rob do. I had to tell them — they might have heard at school. Anyhow, Rob reads everything in the papers. They don't properly take it in. I heard two days ago. I haven't told Mother. She'll be so upset and sorry. I don't feel ready for that. And somehow I needed to be alone with it. You understand?'

'Indeed, I do.'

They were in the kitchen again and it was full of the noise and chatter of the children. Rob teased Milly and she began to cry; then Liza Jean joined in out of sympathy; and old Mrs. Leach, excited by the noise, started talking in that high deaf voice of hers. Zillpah interposed: the clamour was quickly subdued and the children ate more or less quietly. Tea does not take long when the fare is bread and margarine; they soon had enough and were readily induced to go out. Zillpah sighed.

'It's not fair on them; but when I'm tired their noise makes me cross. It's their questions... I get moidered with them. Jimmy never did: he had endless patience with them. I don't know how I'm going to bring them up without him. Rob is an awful tease, and Milly's fractious often: she's none too strong, I'm afraid. They don't get on too well together; and these eighteen months he's been away they've missed him shockingly: I've not learned to be wise with them

like he was. I get so tired I can't think of anybody but myself.'

She had been gathering up the tea things as she spoke, and now, standing by the sink, was sluicing them with water.

'Do rest for a minute — or let me do that.'

Zillpah pushed her back into her seat and went on washing up.

'I can't. That's part of it. When I'm tired I can't stop.'

'You shouldn't have gone to the mill. I'm sure that was too much of a strain.'

Zillpah turned off the tap. 'Oh, it makes no difference. I might as well go soon as late — and with four to feed I have to, now. But — tell you the truth, I didn't mean to start this morning. It was seeing Mr. Claviger made me. Oh, didn't you know he'd been?' Zillpah had turned to the table and caught her start of surprise. 'Yes, this morning. Ever so early. On his way to station, he said. Has he got to go back?'

'Yes. I'm afraid so.'

Zillpah was looking at her now, and her blue eyes suddenly filled.

'Oh, Mrs. Claviger! And after all you've been through, too.'

'After all *he's* been through,' said Jean with sudden fierceness of emphasis. Zillpah stared.

'But you never cared for that Mr. Henshaw.' It was an assertion, not a question. No need to tell Zillpah: she understood. 'But, of course, Mr. Claviger thought you did. I know what it is. Jimmy was that good to Liza Jean —— But sometimes I'd see him looking at her, and his look just drove a knife right through me. He knew I'd never cared for any man but him, never. But it hurt him. If he'd shot the old man, I'd not have been surprised. Even after years.

Funny how they are, isn't it? Jimmy thought the world of Mr. Harold. I felt real touched — his coming like that... not minding the people staring as he came along. Yes. It did me good. Just his coming.'

Zillpah paused, wiping her hands on her apron.

'I wasn't going to mill to-day, but, seeing him, somehow I thought I would. It's better really... what's happened has happened. There's no altering it. And I knew it would be. I knew last time he was home. Strictly, I always knew. He tried to say No. But he knew, too. I brought him bad luck.'

'Oh, Zillpah, don't think like that.'

Zillpah looked at her. 'It makes no difference one way or the other. He's gone. There's nothing of him left. And you needn't be afraid of me thinking too much. I shan't. Lancashire women have no time to think. Look at her.' She indicated her mother by a movement of her slender shoulder. 'You'd think she was seventy, wouldn't you? She isn't. She's not fifty. She's had thirty years of mill and eleven children. There's only three living, but eleven were born. Father earned good wages — but he put 'em on horses. She had to do it all. Early and late. I'm better off nor her. I had Jimmy for four years. That's more than most women get, in all their life. When you think what he was... and what most women get — here. Jimmy would never let me be a beast of burden: he hated me going back to mill. But I had to... And now it doesn't matter.'

'What did Harold say to you?' Jean had tried, hard, to keep her mind fixed on Zillpah; but it was difficult, when there was so much, for her, in this act of his; it moved her strangely and deeply: meant something, very important, though she did not yet know what.

'He said that, for Jimmy, it was best: he was best out of it:

that I had no idea what it was like. He was right there — Jimmy didn't tell me anything about it. No: he said, "I'm here — not there: there is gone, while I'm here." When he was home in August — he went back on the second of September — he never mentioned France. Oh, yes — once: only once — and that was when he said he wished he had had his leave the same time as Mr. Claviger, he wanted that badly to see him, to have a talk with him. He'd not seen him, you know, since he joined up. I told him that — Mr. Claviger, I mean — and he said, Yes: he wished the same. Jimmy and he got on wonderfully, always.'

'You had a happy time, when he was home?'

'Oh, yes. That's what I told Mr. Claviger. And he looked at me and said, funny-like: "Just hold on to that, Zillpah. You were happy together. Don't forget it. Don't be..." He stopped there as if he couldn't find the right word for what he wanted to say. "Don't be afraid of it," he said. I don't rightly know just what he meant by that. Do you?'

'Yes, I think so. He meant that your happiness together — it was real. It was, wasn't it? So even this sadness can't take it altogether away.'

Zillpah looked up, her eyes very bright now. 'Yes,' she said slowly. 'I see. It hurts me, now, to remember... but it would hurt him if I were to forget? Yes. Then, I said to him, "But what am I to do?"'

'Yes?'

'He looked at me very strangely. I can't explain it, but it was a look I shan't ever forget. And he said: "Just remember him... As he was, when he was glad. You will find the way to do that. It's hard. But you will." Somehow, when he said that, it made me stop crying. He was so gentle, so good, and so sad — I felt ashamed of grieving. And so sweet to Liza Jean always. Oh, I hope he'll come back safe...'

Jean had no words: she could only take Zillpah's rough little hand between her own and hold it hard.

'If only Liza Jean were his: if there were something of him left!'

'He loved her just as if she was his.'

'Oh, yes. But you know what I mean.'

'Yes, I know. But one has just got to hang on to the children — even if they're not our own.'

'Oh, Mrs. Claviger — and you lost yours.'

'Yes: but that's how I understand how you feel.'

'What's that you're saying?' Old Mrs. Leach had suddenly waked up.

'Nothing, Mother.'

'Who's that?' She stared through her bleared eyes at Jean, as if she had not noticed her before.

'Young Mrs. Claviger, Mother, — Mrs. Harold Claviger. You've seen her already. She was at tea.'

'Oh, yes. Very kind of her, to be sure. And Mr. Claviger's been acquitted, you say. That's right. Men should look after their wives. Yes. I used to tell George so in my young days. I was pretty when he married me: lots of lads were after me. A four-loom weaver who's pretty was a rare catch and he knew it. Are you on four looms now, Zillpah?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'That's right. And Milly will be all right when she starts. She's got the fingers. The Enderby fingers. Where'd Claviger's be but for them?' She dropped back into a doze.

'Jimmy made me promise once,' Zillpah said softly, 'that Liza Jean shouldn't ever go to mill. He really did think about her as if she was his own.'

'Zillpah — you must let me help about that. About Liza Jean. I mean... help with the future...'

'Yes.' Zillpah's eyes clouded for an instant. 'He had

great plans for her... always for somebody else.' Suddenly the tears rose. 'Oh, I can't really believe it... that I shall never see him again.'

Jean looked at her, heartsick.

'Dear Zillpah — there's nothing I can say. Except what Harold said. Those four years... You had them... They're real, those years. They're safe. Nothing can take them from you. You *know*. That's why I —— You've no idea what a mess I've made, though you can guess some of it. I hold on to you, Zillpah. Yes, really I do. You and Liza Jean and Rob and Milly. And the other children, not ours. They're here. We must look after them... not let it happen again.'

Zillpah was crying now, softly, her head on Jean's shoulder. She hardly heard, perhaps: but Jean, with a strong sense of irony, heard herself falling back into it — that 'never again' talk. And now, at this moment, at every moment the clock ticked out, the thing that was never to be again was going on and one had no power to stop it; at every moment life was being annihilated and cruelty fed; at every tick, what had happened to Zillpah was happening to somebody. If one could not stop it now, could one prevent it in the future?

In the kitchen it was growing dark. Mrs. Leach by the fire was snoring faintly. Except that, there was no sound save the ticking of the clock on the wall and the trickle of water from a tap that lacked a washer: and now and then, from outside, the voices of the children playing in the street. She looked at Zillpah's fair head and thought of the girl whose photograph was in Harold's pocket, who was so like her. They had to go on living, both that girl and Zillpah, just as she had to go on living. Zillpah had Liza Jean; perhaps the German girl had something or someone. And she had Harold — Harold, who was still alive though so un-

happy that he wished he were not. Whether or no, they had to go on, all of them, somehow or other.

'Yes,' said Zillpah, looking up at last and speaking as if in answer to her thoughts. 'It's like a loom — you have to go on while it does. The loom doesn't care how you feel.'

III

INSTEAD of going into Claviger House, she walked past it, up the hill, along the familiar road that led past The Pyes to the country. On that road, quite deserted at this hour save for an occasional lorry, and with her back to the town, she was alone with the thoughts that had beaten in on her during her talk with Zillpah. The overpowering fact was that Harold had been to see Zillpah. She saw it: saw him, getting up earlier than he needed, even for that vile early train; walking through the town regardless of the curious eyes that might be staring at him; going out of his way to Queen Mary Road; talking to Zillpah in the little lobby; saying to her that, even so, there was something left: Harold — for whom there seemed to be nothing left. Its meaning stretched on and on. His going did not surprise her: that his kindness still lived, she knew; and in Zillpah he saluted suffering itself. But why did what he had said not surprise her? For it did not. Surprise was not what she felt. Yet the thoughts he had expressed were her own: the new thoughts that had begun, timid, uncertain shoots, yet living, to push through the frozen surface of her mind during the hours she had spent in Roberta's studio, looking back over the past. More, they were the thoughts native to her Harold, the Harold of Moragh, of Bluehills, of life before the war. To her, he could not utter them. That did not matter. What did matter, matter profoundly, was that they still lived in him, beneath the iron casing of his misery. Pain enclosed him,

had penetrated his very soul. He suffered, as few perhaps could suffer, since he could feel the agony of others, even of others unknown to him, as his own. But suffering had not killed his heart. It moved still, in kindness. Kindness to Zillpah — not to her. Why not to her? Last night she had begun to see, now she saw. If he was not, could not be, kind to her: if he did not, could not speak to her, was not the reason the same as that which made him unkind to himself? For to himself he was surely unkinder than to any, just as the darkest silence was that within his own soul. He might try to shield, to safeguard her: yes: he had been doing that, on his first leave, and again on his second. Yet he had failed. And he had failed because unaffected by words, spoken or unspoken, unbroken by actions and omissions, hers or his, their companionship persisted. His unselfishness had hidden it from her as her selfishness had hidden it from him. But it was stronger than either.

He would fain, still, protect her from knowing what war was; but loving him, she had to know. Not now, in a flash, but continuously, as the substance and meaning of the years behind them, as the substance and meaning, also, of the years ahead. It might, it must, sometime, somehow, come to an end; but no 'ending' could bring back the Harold who knew it not, any more than it could bring back Jimmy Dalton or Stephen Henshaw or Jim Carthew. No: not even if he lived. It was not a sickness from which he would recover, and be as he was before its onset. He would never be again as he was. Nor would he, ever, tell her about it. He could not. She must share, without showing it, in a silence equal to his own. That was what she had to face: the best she could look forward to. She might know; she must know; but the more she knew, the less must she mention it. Not mentioning it sounded so easy, so small a thing to do; but that

very smallness made it, for her, and she knew it, hard: very hard. A big sacrifice had a helping halo: she was asked for incessant, invisible acts, not of doing, but of refraining from doing: 'And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.' She shuddered as the prospect stretched out before her, in icy, grey monotony. It was weak, it was poor, this passionate need of expression; but there it was. Not to speak, not to show, not, visibly, to share — that was, for her, the hardest trial. Was not Harold's worse? Of course it was. It had been, it would be. For he would not forget. The evil had happened. No ending of the war would end it for him. It would be a part of him now, for ever: and not a separate part, but a strand that was woven into the most intimate tissue of his being. There was no power in her fingers to pluck it out: their touch could only wake it to conscious anguish. She had got to leave him alone.

She walked faster. The air was cold now; a penetrating damp was in the mist; a sense as of rain coming; the light was fading. She had thought she might see the sunset from the high ridge; but, walk as fast and as far as she might, she would not: the sun had simply dropped below the horizon, lost itself behind the dense unbroken cloudbank, with no glory in its setting, no colour cast on the even, greying pallor of the sky. She felt her throat closing: a pain in her chest. She swallowed hard. Being sorry for herself was cowardice and treachery. That pit she had dug before, and fallen into it to her own and his destruction. She coughed; then sneezed. That was better. What was she walking on and on for? There was no sense in that. She turned sharply on her tracks. Roberta: she must write to Roberta: tell her she was not going back to London, ask to have her trunk sent to her here.

London: how far away it seemed, already; a bright but

irrelevant splash of terrible colour. Except Roberta, there was nothing, now, in London for her: and Roberta must come and see her, here, where she belonged. Funny how strongly she felt that, now: that she belonged to Bluehills. It was not only Harold's place; now, it was, somehow, hers, too. She passed the little lane that led to The Pyes. The house itself was dark: but in the long low hospital annex all the windows were lit; they were using both wings now, it seemed: that meant the beds were full. Ought she to go back to her work there? Perhaps: later; for the moment, she thought not; there were nearer tasks for her, less showy. At the next bend in the road Bluehills came into view. The dusk was gathering fast now: the grey of the sky was turning to blue. The road beyond her ran like a ribbon in and out between the trees, until it lost itself in the solid mass of the town, where the buildings were merged in darkness, outlined only by the gaunt shapes of the tall chimneys to right and left, and more dimly rising again behind the central block made by the Town Hall and the station. In the factories to the extreme left night work must be going on: in one long building quite clear of the trees she could pick out a line of yellow windows: a pattern of dots against the black that would soon be obliterated when lights were shrouded, lest they attract enemy air raids. As she stared down, one of the chimneys belched forth a great trail of black smoke, shot with flame; a cascade of fiery sparks followed. The black coils hung on the air for a moment, then faded off again. Inside the building rows of pale-faced men were at work now, amid the noise and heat of clanging machinery — the iron monsters to which night and day, war and peace, unhappiness and happiness, were indifferent. In imagination she was there, and for a moment seemed actually to hear the rending clangour of the frames. The men and women who

did hear and served that noise went on, day in, day out, uncomplaining. They did not talk about it. They did not say it was unbearable, that monotonous toil. Zillpah had been to mill to-day, though she knew Jimmy had been killed and she should never see him again: and her case was that of countless women. It made no difference to the looms how you felt, she had said. They went on: if one minder fell out, another took his place. Just as in the trenches. Everyone took looms and Bluehills — and the world was full of looms and of Bluehills, the same in substance though under different names — for granted. Just as they took the war for granted.

Bluehills. A hundred thousand people. They had to go on, they went on, whatever happened. It grew darker: the buildings and the sky began to run together, as the blue faded and thickened into the black pall of night. The lights that gave form, and sometimes even a grim but definite beauty, to the picture of the town as seen from here at night, were all hooded. War-time regulations shut off the little candles cast by good deeds in a naughty world, extinguished the little points of kindness. Kindness — a small thing: a thing one took as a matter of course — until it was not there. She shivered. It was definitely cold now: the night air felt wintry. She walked swiftly down the hill, back to Claviger House.

Cassie opened the door to her ring.

'Haven't you a latch-key?' she muttered in a cross, fault-finding tone. That was merely habit. She detached a key from her bunch and handed it over with an awkward, uncertain smile. 'That's your old one. I've kept it. Just in case... There, that looks as though you had come to stay.'

'Would you like me to?' she asked, holding the key in her hand.

'Oh, yes,' cried Cassie eagerly. 'It's been horrid without you... but — are you going to?'

'Yes. I think so.'

Cassie's dull eyes almost sparkled.

'You'll find it deadly after London,' she said. 'No Harold... but the home will seem alive again with you in it. Have you had your tea?'

'Yes — but if I might I'd like some bread and milk, to eat later... I didn't have much.' As she said it, it occurred to her that she had had all the children at 44, Queen Mary Road, were to have, between then and breakfast, or Zillpah either. She and Mrs. Leach might have another cup of tea: not more.

She went upstairs. The sitting-room was dark and cold. She set a light to the fire and moved to the window to draw the curtains before turning on the lights. Dense black without, but a breeze was getting up, and her ear caught the low thrumming of the machinery as one did when the wind was in this quarter. What was Zillpah doing now? Thinking of Jimmy, as she of Harold, who envied Jimmy, since he was out of it. Suppose Harold were to be killed... he might. It was indeed miraculous that he had escaped. Providence — a malign Providence, Stephen had suggested — seemed to have watched over him: in all these months, he had not been wounded or gassed or shell-shocked. Physically, he survived intact. She did not believe he was going to be killed. Nor did he. Nothing in that; everyone thought that her loved one would escape.

She drew the curtains. The firelight played over the room: it was looking itself again. It was nice, that room; they had been happy there, and that happiness was real — as real as that of Jimmy and Zillpah. It had been. It would not come

again. She must see those pictures of the past, but not dream of or yearn for their repetition. He had sat in that chair reading 'The Ring and the Book' aloud, while she sewed at little garments for the baby; he had lain before the fire stretched on the leopard-skin rug — Jim Carthew had shot the leopard in Africa and brought the skin home for him as a wedding present — with his head against her knees, when he had his sudden attack of lumbago; the seat of her favourite stool had been mended, and most neatly mended by him with green string, one evening when deep snow had shut them in with its wonderful sense of silence; they had bought nearly all the furniture in the room together, and there was nothing in it that had not precious associations. The leather cushion on the piano stool recalled a morning they had spent in the Wiener Werkstätte: old Schlidt's son-in-law was a manager there and had taken them over, and they had had a most amusing lunch with him and his wife after. What had happened, she wondered, to Berthold and to Amalia? The opalescent glass bowl which now held the sweet peas had been bought in Munich, carried home triumphantly inside her best hat, and produced, uncracked, despite his dismal forebodings of disaster. The ash trays on the mantelpiece came from the Kermesse in Styria, on their honeymoon. His pens, on the bureau, were in the stone jar that used to stand on her father's table in Moragh; and with that ridiculous measuring tape, that came out of the mouth of a glass pussy and could never be induced to go back into it, he had played with Tamar when Tamar was a kitten, a frisky ball of fur. Those days would not come back. The days the future held — if it held any — would be darker and quite different. But the happy days had been. In this room they had been lovers, they had been companions. Companions — companions surely they could still be. If she could be silent, he could not keep her out.

It sounded easy to be silent. She knew that she could as yet perceive only the dimmest outline of how difficult it was going to be. She would need all that Zillpah, all that Liza Jean, all that Cassie, all that Harold himself could give her in kindness if she was to be able to do it. She might fail, even so. But if by an infinitesimal degree the burden of loneliness could be lifted from him... if at moments he could feel that what he had said to Zillpah was true, for him... if the past could be real enough for him to feel that he still had it, whatever he had lost... She removed an invisible speck of dust from the smooth mahogany of the piano with her handkerchief.

She went into the bedroom; took off her hat; put on her slippers. Then from the tiny kitchen she assembled bread and milk, a jug, cocoa, sugar, plates, and mugs on a tray and set the whole on the stool by the sitting-room fire: brought the kettle in and set it on the hob. Two mugs — perhaps it was tempting Providence to put two, but one would be dishonest: she was not going to make cocoa for one. He would be tired, cold, hungry, and very late. At the best of times that last train was a horror, and nowadays... And the others would have gone to bed. She poked her head through the curtains. It was raining now, out of a dead black sky: Bluehills was invisible.

Opening the piano, she sat down. From her pile of music she had dug out the Diabelli Variations, not played since that afternoon in late September, three years ago, when he had told her he was going. Now she set the book before her on the rack. On a little tune, that in itself seemed nothing, Beethoven, already deaf to this world's noises, had built this mighty structure that reached down to earth's foundations and up to heaven itself; taking the tiny, trivial framework of some insignificant note sequences, he had put everything

into it, drawn everything out of it, and one could only reach the sublime heights to which he lifted one, here, by playing right through. There was no jumping into his heaven: the little, uninteresting passages, the ones that seemed merely formal workings on the theme, had their essential place. She played the theme. It was simple, unimportant, but not trifling. As simple as being silent ought to be, to her. Her fingers, after the morning's scales and chords, were better than she had expected. Schlidt would not have allowed her to tackle the Variations with such fingers, but there was nothing else she wanted to play.

An hour, two hours, three, passed. She was still at the piano, but the last notes she had sounded had long died away. The room was quiet; the house quiet. She got up: put on coal; poked the fire; pushed the kettle further on. Her watch had stopped — how long ago she did not know — at a quarter to twelve. She went to the window, threw it up at the bottom, dropping the curtains behind her, so that only a thread of light could show, and leaned out. The rain had ceased: the sky, though watery still and starless, was clear, the air quiet and soft. From the town, she fancied she could hear the dull whirr of working looms. For the rest, Bluehills slept.

Suddenly, vaguely, she became aware of a faint noise, a long way off, but definite and unmistakable. Footsteps somewhere on the road. A long steady stride: not the shuffle of a tramp or the click-clack of a clog; a firm, decisive step. She listened intently: it acquired a precise shape; she would have known that step anywhere: it was Harold's; Harold walking home from the station. Now he was on the road between the trees: invisible. The steps came on: now he was entering the drive; that was the click of the gate. In a moment he would be out in the open sweep. Yes, she could

see him. Had he not seen the line of light of her window? Surely, from the drive, he must... if he looked up: but perhaps he had not looked up.

There was a pause: a long pause. He was standing, now, under the porch, unlocking the door. No, he came out again into the open; stood below the window, was looking up. Now, he spoke; his voice came up clear, though muted.

'I've forgotten my key.'

'Oh, I'll come down.' Far too loud, her voice.

'No, don't bother. Throw it out to me.'

'All right. Half a mo'.' Funny: now he was there, she was calm; she felt nothing. She found the key and, returning to the window, threw it down. 'There you are.' Her tone was as subdued as his had been.

He caught it, neatly; in another second she heard it turning in the door; then the closing of the door, the light flashing up below. There was a long silence. She went out to the head of the stairs, whence, leaning over, she could see him standing in the hall. He had taken off his hat and coat, but stood there as if listening to something.

'Come up and have some cocoa.'

He looked up. In the strong light cast upon it by the hall lamp, his face was ghastly. And yet what a boy, with that thick mat of hair!

'Sh... sh... Don't wake the others... All right.'

She moved back into the room: the kettle was singing. When he appeared, she was mixing cocoa with milk into a smooth paste in the bottom of the jug. For a moment he stood in the doorway; then, coming in, he closed it behind him.

'Do you know what time it is?'

'No idea.'

'After one.'

'You must be famishing.'

'I am.' He approached the fire now. The kettle boiled; she poured the water into the jug; then decanted the mixture into two mugs, handing him the larger one — a mug with a red-and-blue pattern they had once bought in the market.

'Hullo — here's my own mug! It's not fair, this; it's twice the size of yours. However, I didn't get any dinner, so perhaps I deserve it. A fire is nice, too: I didn't realize how cold I was — or hungry.'

She was making toast now: glad of the excuse to keep her face averted. Her calm was external only, now: underneath it her heart was beating wildly, and through her head there throbbed a prayer: 'God, God, don't let me say or do anything silly: don't let me cry.' But all she said was:

'Could you get the butter? It's in the usual place.'

He rose and fetched it, and she spread it on the hot slice of bread, brown and crisp.

'All this for me?'

'Yes, yes. I can make another in a minute... No, do eat it. There's more cocoa, too, if your mug's empty.'

'Really? Marvellous pot that. But I don't believe the little bear has had any.'

'Oh, yes, he has... Oh, I'm sorry.' Her hand shook: some of the cocoa spilt over the edge of his mug. But he seemed to take no notice. She did not know whether he had yet looked at her, whether he were now doing so. At him she had not dared to look, but kept her eyes glued to the toasting-fork, although he was sitting on the sofa, so near her that she could have touched him.

'Were they nice to you at the War Office?'

'Oh, very... They're sending me back at once. To-morrow. No, to-day. They're short of officers. Can't be too particular now.'

'Oh!' That 'Oh' was not meant to express anything, but as it came out it sounded to her like the protracted miaow of a cat. It made Harold look at her. She could feel his eyes. Still he said nothing. It seemed to her that a long time had passed when, suddenly, she heard his voice, low but distinct, on her name.

'Jean, can you stay here? With Mother and Cassie?'

'You want me to?'

'Yes... if you can bear it.'

She could not look at him. She could only nod. But this last phrase made her feel ashamed. She must say something, to meet the generosity of that.

'I'm sorry I left them... I ought not to have done. Really, it was all my fault. If I'd only stayed. But I didn't understand. I do now. And Cassie... Cassie will make it easy.'

'All this,' he muttered, over a pause, 'has been very hard for Mother. And for my father, too. He's very proud. And there's too much force in him: it's never found its scope. That's why, I think... You know...'

'You know.' The broken, inarticulate phrase fell on her heart like balm. He did not cast her out altogether: there was still something that belonged to them both. He wanted her to stay; he minded what she did; his coming in and drinking cocoa with her meant for him something near to what it meant for her. He could not say anything, but there he was: 'You know...' it might only cover the aberrations of his father. What did that matter? The phrase was her talisman. Feeling it, something else came back to her mind.

'I went to see Zillpah this afternoon. It was good of you to go. It meant a great deal to her. It was really... kind.' Kind! She had hesitated for the word. Yet no other was just right.

'Oh, I don't know,' he was saying. 'There was nothing to

say. There is nothing to say. She's brave, your Zillpah...'

He glanced about the room.

'You've been playing. What a long time it seems! Do you know there's one bit in that thing we used to call the "Big" Beethoven that I want dreadfully to hear. If you could...?'

'If you could?' Didn't he know that if he asked for her head on a charger, or anything else, she would give it him, gladly, when he asked, and in that voice? To be asked to do something... She was on her feet, instantly, that she might not fall at his and kiss them.

'Show me the one you mean. I've been playing them right through. I'm shockingly out of practice — but still...'

'It's one about the middle: I think you said somebody called it "The Oracle."'

'Oh, Harold!'

She was at the instrument now: he standing beside her as she turned over the leaves. She could see the reflection of him in the smooth mahogany; the light of the fire winked on the little buckle on the strap of his watch. But she was not to look at that.

'There' — he pointed. 'That's the one.'

She knew which it was already: and needed no notes to play it. Had she not played it three times this evening, once with the tears falling so fast that they dropped onto the keyboard and she could not see her fingers? 'The Oracle' would serve as a name to know it by, but it reached out far beyond prophecy, this. In it was realized what Wordsworth meant when he spoke of how 'laid asleep in body, we become a living soul': it held things speech could not utter or eyes behold. Time annihilated, space transcended, here the liberated spirit had contact with a truth beyond reasoning or argument, knew a love beyond giving and taking... Pain

and darkness the future might and did hold for her, and much more for him; but that Harold asked her to play for him, and to play this: that they listened to it, together — this was something no pain, no darkness could obliterate.

She played; he listened. He stood beside her: he was still standing there, silent, motionless, as the sound died away. For a moment her fingers stayed on the keys. Then she looked up and his eyes were on her face. He said nothing; he only looked at her. But now he saw her: his left hand found her right, and held it fast.

A coal fell from the fire onto the hearth with a sharp noise, but he still held her hand. Now he was not looking at her, but straight out in front of him. Through the curtains, slightly lifted and parted by the wind which had risen again with the ceasing of the rain, a shaft of chill air came suddenly. It seemed to blow directly at him; the hair on his brow was lifted and parted by its breath. And, with the wind, there came through the open gap a long shaft of cold daylight. Yes: now the day was coming in: the new day, the day that was to take him back to France. It fell full on his face, bringing out the deep lines engraved on his brow and furrowed between nostrils and mouth: lines that were not there before. His face was grey with fatigue, and something beyond fatigue. As she gazed up at him, the firm line of his lips relaxed; his lips moved, he was speaking, at first to himself rather than to her.

'It's done. He's dead: I can't bring him back. No one can bring any of them back.' His eyes shifted. Now they were on her again. 'I have done this — to you. You have to carry it, too.'

'Ah, if only you can let me!'

He still held her hand, but his eyes were on the ground.

'I can't help it... I thought I could. But I can't.'

He turned towards her now; again his eyes held hers. Was there anything in them but pain? — a pain no tenderness of hers could mitigate.

'I can't even say, Forgive me. For I know you do.' His voice was very low, almost a whisper.

'Oh, forgive!' she breathed, hardly louder. 'Oh, my dear, no, no: not that, not that; don't say that, to me. If I had been different... if I'd only been wise and true: if I'd been like Zillpah...'

She leaned her head against him, that he might not see the tears she could not longer hold back. He let go of her hand, but only that he might take her head between his two. For a moment he held it so: then, bending down, he kissed her: her wet eyes, then her lips.

'My dear, my dear,' he murmured. 'We can't help it, either of us. We can only hold on to one another, after all.'

No words came to her: she could only nod, her head hidden now against him, his arm round her.

'If I come back...' She heard his voice, though she could not see his face. 'If not — you will look after them, won't you?'

She raised her head.

'Yes,' she whispered. Then, looking up at him, her tears dried now, her voice steady, 'Yes. I'll try.'

Very gently he released her, and moved away from the piano, to the window. The air was coming in strongly now, the curtains waving wildly. He drew them back. The night was over: grey and cold, day was breaking in the east. Already across that quarter of the sky there stretched a sword of tremulous light, the path, uncertain as yet, along which the sun would travel, bringing in the morning. Unseen it was there: somewhere behind the opaque whiteness that

shrouded it. He stood looking out. Jean got up from the piano stool, came to the window, and stood there by his side. Now, down in the hollow, below the trees, the town was visible again. Sordid and desolate it looked, as it lay there, black under the colourless sky: the chimneys lifting like accusing fingers above the dense mass of poor dwellings. Here and there smoke was rising in vague curls that lost themselves in the grey: beneath the quiet the ear could catch the hum of machinery that knew no pause.

Harold looked at it, his expression stern, his features rigid, and slowly shook his head.

'Out there, one dreams of England,' he said. Then, turning away from the window, 'To-morrow, no, to-day. You must get some sleep, Jean... I, too... Good-night. Good-morning.'

He stretched out his hands, took hers and held them. For a moment they stood so, hands clasped, eyes meeting. Then he quietly released her hands. The next moment she heard the door close behind him, and his footsteps on the stairs above.

THE END

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Mary Agnes Hamilton

was recently elected to Parliament on the Labor ticket and is widely known for her much discussed critical estimate of 'Ramsay MacDonald — the Man of the Hour,' which she published under the pen name of 'Iconoclast.' She was the only woman on the Balfour Committee on British Trade and Industry and is one of two women on the British Delegation to the League of Nations Conference at Geneva. She is also a member of the Royal Commission on Civil Service.

'Three Against Fate' is Mrs. Hamilton's fourth novel. Aside from her political work she has been a free-lance journalist and written vigorously on economic, political, and literary subjects. For several years she was assistant editor to Sir Philip Gibbs on the *Review of Reviews* and also served on the staff of the *Economist*, *Common Sense*, and the *New Leader*.

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